

Title: Comes Out of Darkness Morn.

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Warnings: Violence, language, references to rape and torture, messed-up psychology, character deaths later in this and other stories in the series.

Notes: Yes, I know I'm posting a day early. That's because I'll be traveling tomorrow, so I won't have time to write the chapter then.

Welcome to the third story in this crazy AU I'm writing. Comes Out of Darkness Morn will have references and resemblances to the canon plot of Prisoner of Azkaban, but it's moving further away from it than the first two stories did from their canon inspirations, because of the changes that have built up as the AU continues. Therefore, if you haven't, I strongly suggest you read Saving Connor and No Mouth But Some Serpent's before this story. Otherwise, COoDM will be nearly incomprehensible.

As a warning for this individual story: Except for the seventh one, which will cover the War, this is most likely the darkest in the series. Harry's plummeted to the bottom and has to work his way back up.

That's the reason the first chapter is like it is. Harry is telling it, and his mind is, um, kind of a mess right now, because of what happened at the end of NMBSS. It gets better, but it starts near the bottom. Onward!

Chapter One: Reintegration

Twice in one week, all the windows in Malfoy Manor shattered. Once they broke and cracked and crazed in the shape of lightning bolts. The second time, they formed coiled serpents with Locusta markings. Harry played with them, the magic healing any wounds the glass inflicted on him as soon as they were made.

Narcissa came up beside him and repaired the windows each time, then led Harry away from the mess they'd made. Harry couldn't

always remember just what she said, but later he thought there was pumpkin juice and Narcissa's voice telling stories of what had used to happen when she was a child in the Black family and lived with her sisters Bellatrix and Andromeda. They were always mild, cheerful stories. Harry listened to them, and sipped at whatever drink she gave him, and felt Draco standing as silent sentry beside the chair or the divan, until he fell asleep.

The star was five-armed, made of clear glass in the center and opaque, white glass towards the edges. Harry traced one finger away from the center and down to the points. They were sharp enough to cut. Of course they were. There would be no reason to have this gift in such a shape, otherwise.

Harry looked up and away from the star to Lucius's face. Draco's father stood, tensely, on the other side of the sitting room. He'd levitated the star to Harry rather than trying to bring it to him, considering that Draco and Narcissa both stood on either side of Harry and watched him suspiciously. But he had brought it. He was supposed to. The star was the Midsummer gift, the middle-of-the-year gift, the fifth gift in this strange dance he was doing with Harry which supposedly proclaimed he wanted a truce. He had sent a ring set with a piece of ice enchanted never to melt, and a green stone to symbolize the growth of new bonds. Harry had replied with a piece of ebony, indicating his distrust of Lucius's motives, and a red stone, to remind him of the blood that still lay between their families.

But now...

Harry gazed down at the star. The clarity of it told him how much Lucius trusted him, and the positioning of the clear patch in the center indicated that the trust could grow in any direction. Of course, since Harry still had no idea why Lucius had chosen to play this game, to pretend that he wanted a truce when he'd already hurt Harry by handing Tom Riddle's diary to him, that clear patch could mean anything. Lucius Malfoy was perfectly capable of playing along until something happened to benefit him, such as his Lord returning to life.

Harry had to reply to the star, or at least nod to show that he accepted the gift and would find a suitable reply later. He put a hand

on the star and closed his eyes instead. His magic rushed to his command. It was still near the surface, churning and slashing at his thoughts whenever he wasn't using it. After so long confined, as Professor Snape had explained in one of the letters that came twice every week, it had a force of its own, nearly a personality. Harry had to use it. If he denied it, the way he had for years, then it would simply break free on its own. It had already done so, shattering all the windows in Malfoy Manor, as Harry dimly remembered.

Now, though, he could put it to a productive use, and he did so, altering the gift. As he gazed, strands of frost raced across the star, hardening it and obscuring the center, so that the glass was entirely opaque. He levitated it back to Lucius, carefully. He had to be careful with everything he did with magic lately. It took so little to rouse it to full, raw strength, at which point he smashed things. Finesse and control were far harder arts than summoning power.

Lucius accepted the star and gazed at the lack of a clear patch. Then he raised his eyes to Harry's face. He did not look offended. He merely nodded thoughtfully and turned to slip from the room.

Harry closed his eyes for just a moment, as he thought, but opened them in the bedroom the Malfoys had turned over to his use. The window was open, and he could smell the scent of roses through it. Sunlight streamed in, and the radiant songs of birds. Harry lay there and listened.

After a little while, Draco came in and put a hand on his arm. "Mother said I should go if you wanted me to," he whispered.

Harry let him stay. His hand was warmer than the sunlight, and even though Harry found it as hard to understand the things he talked about as it was to understand the birds, together they made a sharp and musical kind of sense.

Harry's memory was tattered and fogged, bits of webs clinging to each other the way they had before Sylarana died and took a large part of his sanity with her. But they suddenly tore away on one day towards the end of June, as he sat in the broad piano room and listened to Narcissa play.

Harry blinked and sat up. Narcissa looked over at him, but never stopped the graceful, swift motion of her fingers over the keys, or the low, crooning drone of her voice that accompanied it. She was teaching one of the history songs to Draco, the ones the purebloods had taught their children when the old ways had to be memorized and instinctive. Draco sat at the foot of the piano and gazed intently up at his mother, mouthing the words along with her. He was learning about the dance, the rights and rules of a host or a pureblooded wizard or witch on his or her own land, the proper ways that one treated a guest, and all the other courtesies for living life among powerful people with recourse to magic that would end each other's lives in an instant. They were rituals rarely used anymore. Draco had asked to learn them. Harry had the faint recollection that the asking had something to do with him.

But the music. The music.

Harry sagged back against the couch he sat on, and listened to Narcissa's voice caress the notes. She was telling the tale meant to seal in notions of marriage to most pureblooded children, the tragic love story of Pomona Ironbrand and Septimus Prince. They had not been equals; Pomona had chosen Septimus because she was in love with his weakness, not any strength that could match hers, and Septimus had killed her in jealousy and himself in grief. The lesson, repeated in every refrain, was to choose only a mate of equal power, or to be sure that true love existed between a mismatched pair.

Harry had known the story by the time he was six. He'd read the history songs out of books, since his own mother was Muggleborn and his father wasn't interested in holding on to pureblood customs he thought were old-fashioned and probably Dark besides. There was something different about hearing it sung.

Lily. James.

Don't think about them.

For a moment, Harry's anger trembled on the edge of control, and if his parents had been there, he would have asked them the questions

that waited behind the anger. Why had they felt the need to weave webs into his mind as they had? Why hadn't they brought him up to control his power, rather than deny it? Why had they thought that the only possible place he could have in the family was as guardian and guide to his brother Connor? Yes, Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived, Voldemort's enemy, but did that really mean that Harry's childhood and very self had to be sacrificed on the altar of necessity? Why hadn't they taken more of a part in defending Connor? Why had they never come to visit him when he lay in the hospital wing after driving Tom Riddle from his head last December? He knew now that Riddle had promptly possessed his brother, and that was the reason Connor hadn't come to visit him. What were his parents' excuses?

And battling that was all the training he had received until this point in his life, or the broken remnants of it, arguing that they had done what they had done for the best reasons, that he had to understand, that he could never fully understand until he confronted them and listened to their explanation, that, that, that...

He didn't realize the music had stopped until he heard himself making jagged little noises, like a dog with a bone caught in its throat. Then Draco was beside him, a hand on his shoulder. He steered Harry through a few more rooms, each smaller than the last, and finally through a door made entirely of glass and into a small garden. This garden was the source of the roses and the birdsong that gave Harry such joy through his bedroom window. It looked nearly overgrown now, roses curling in wild profusion on the gates and the walls and the bushes, roses of all colors, white as joy and red as blood and yellow as pain.

Draco lay down on a patch of sun-warmed grass in the center of the garden and drew Harry firmly into his embrace. Harry had to lie with his body sprawled beside Draco's and his head buried in the other boy's shoulder and pale hair, because he didn't have any choice. He might have struggled to pull free at first, especially since the heat was so stifling.

But, gradually, he relaxed. The heat was stifling, and added to by the sunlight and the sweat that covered his own skin and Draco's. But that very closeness made it comforting. There was no way that it

would pull him back and leave him alone in the center of the ice that he still remembered from his defeat of Tom Riddle. Harry's breathing slowed down, and he shifted to put one arm around Draco's shoulder in turn. He could feel the other boy smiling, but his voice was sad when he spoke.

"Not yet?" he whispered.

Harry shook his head and pulled back slightly, so that his head still rested on Draco's shoulder but he could see just a slit of blue sky.

He'd tried since he came to Malfoy Manor, even though he hadn't done it for years. Draco and Narcissa seemed convinced that, if he could do it, it would represent a victory over his years of training. And he had much to mourn—the passing of one stage of his life, the death of his illusions about his parents, Sylarana.

But still it hadn't happened. Harry couldn't cry.

A barn owl came in the middle of the night at the end of June. Harry opened his eyes and found it waiting for him on his windowsill. It hooted softly when it saw that it had his attention and hopped forward, holding out one talon. Harry stood and wavered across the carpet towards it, oddly conscious of the way that the cloth pressed on his bare feet and how the breeze through the window stirred his pyjamas around him.

The owl waited patiently while Harry took the letter from it and fumbled for a Knut from the table near the window to put in its pouch. Then it took off. Harry watched it skim over the garden and then gain height, turning north, towards Scotland. He blinked, then fumbled at the letter.

It was brief, but then, all the letters Snape had sent him over the summer holidays tended to be.

Mr. Potter:

You will find little that exhausts your magic like destruction. The power of Dark spells themselves shows this. They will tire you, and

enable you to rest with a clearer head. Do what you must to keep yourself sane and whole. If that means the destruction of chairs and windows, so be it.

Severus Snape.

Harry closed his eyes and clenched his hands on the letter. He knew that it was a proper answer to the letter he'd written Snape five days ago, asking for potions or some other means to keep himself under control without destroying things. His magic raged inside him and wanted that mayhem. Harry himself did not. He hardly dared to face the fury that he felt against his parents and against Dumbledore. He wanted to use his magic to guard, to protect, to defend, to heal, to create, as Snape had promised him he could when he'd come and rescued Harry from the storm. Why should he have to destroy?

But this answer was simple, clear, cold, and the truth. He had to destroy because, otherwise, his magic would destroy him. Denying it and caging it was what had allowed it to grow to such nightmare proportions, to the cold voice that Harry heard whispering in his dreams. And then, when he faced Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets, his magic had absorbed power from the diary and the memory of Voldemort in a way that Harry still did not understand. Either way, he was stronger than he had been.

He had to let it free.

He sighed, dressed in a robe, and then slipped out of the Manor and over the lawn. He could feel the glow of wards around him, but the Malfoys had given him free rein as a guest for as long as he stayed with them. He stepped past them without much trouble and into the wild country that surrounded the Manor.

His magic flared, raw power that barely obeyed the confines of spoken spells any more, never mind his wand, and created a number of light wooden figures in front of him. It disturbed Harry that some of the figures looked human, but he could pretend they really weren't, in the maze of the starlight and the moonlight. He closed his eyes, and that helped, too.

He flung his first spell.

The night flared with light as the fire caught, and then Harry was hurling other spells, spells to freeze or blast or maim or chop the legs out from under the wooden figures, and he couldn't seem to stop. His magic surged through him, high and singing. It would be so easy to go on using it, or even to turn his back and focus his attention on a real challenge, like the wards around the Manor.

Harry pinched his lips together tightly, hearing the coaxing tones of his wild magic in those thoughts, and refused to listen. He flung spells to destroy the figures, create more, and destroy them again, all the while shielding the grass and the scattered trees from the destructive effects of his spells.

By the time he collapsed, panting, on the ground, he realized that Snape had been right: he had used the magic, and, at the same time, gotten it used to weaving through and integrating with himself, rather than shutting it up in a box in one corner of his soul or mind. He could feel the touch of magic burning beneath his skin, under his ribs. He supposed that was better than before. A little bit better.

Snape's words again returned to him, when Harry had said he didn't want to have the power he had. "But you have it. And you should use it, Harry. Otherwise, it will make an impact on the world, and not one that you desire. It has its own personality at the moment, and its own desire for freedom. If you try to deny it, the same thing will happen again. And perhaps this time you will kill someone else, instead of trying to escape doing so...You are closer now to becoming another Dark Lord than you have ever been."

Harry let out his breath, told himself that, yes, it was for the best, and wallowing in self-pity would not change that he was magical or how magical he was, and went to bed. For the first time since his arrival at the Manor, he slept without dreaming of dark Chambers or golden snakes.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry froze, then deliberately picked up the Chocolate Frog that Narcissa had said he could have after lunch and opened it. He caught

the frog as it tried to hop away and placed it gingerly into his mouth. "Mr. Malfoy," he said, when he had chewed and swallowed the Frog and Lucius had still not gone away. He was beginning to consider it no coincidence that one of the house elves had had an accident that required Narcissa's supervision and that Draco, thinking of a question to ask his mother, had run off to find her. One or both of them had been with him at all times since he arrived in Malfoy Manor. They had never allowed him to be alone with Lucius.

I think that is about to change, Harry thought, and forced himself to lean back in his chair and look at Lucius evenly across the small, highly polished table. He forced himself to see Lucius's reflection in the table and find it amusing, rather than terrifying or as if he suddenly had two powerful, impatient, murderous former Death Eaters to face. He let his breath carefully out of his lungs, and watched Lucius's face.

"Have you seen the Daily Prophet today?" Lucius held the newspaper out in front of him as if it were a peace offering.

Harry blinked, then regretted it as he saw a muscle clench in Lucius's cheek. He had just lost a step in the dance by showing his surprise. He could afford to lose no more.

"I figured it could have little of importance to report," he said distantly as he met Lucius's eyes again, "given that I would have known at once if something had happened to my brother."

Lucius's eyes narrowed. Harry watched him. Let him meditate on that, try to work out how much is truth and how much is lies.

"There is news of other importance," said Lucius, and then slid further around the table, coming towards Harry without making a sound. "For example, if someone who once acted in the name of the Dark Lord was coming to kill you, the Prophet might report on that. Surely, you would want to know."

Harry felt his magic wake, and wondered, also distantly, if Lucius realized just then how much he was taking his life in his hands. Draco had seemed determined to protect Harry from his father. Harry knew

Narcissa was wiser than that, and sometimes had feared to find her husband dead and bleeding on the floor if he pushed too hard.

"I would surely want to know," said Harry, "if something like that was going to happen. And if the one who had once acted in the name of the Dark Lord gave me the courtesy of letting me find out beforehand." He raised his magic higher. He knew that Lucius, like Draco, knew how to sense other wizards if they were powerful enough. Usually, shields protected him from headaches and the other unfortunate consequences of that. Let him feel pain spilling over the top of the shields, then.

Lucius's eyes widened, and then he nodded and backed away, sitting down in a chair at the other end of the table. "Mr. Potter," he said, dropping every pretense of the dance now that the falling of his own mask had stripped his advantage away, "you should know that I do not mean myself."

"So this is not another of the articles exclaiming over the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived going to stay with the Malfoy family, and how inappropriate that is, and how you will surely kill me and use my blood in some ritual to raise your Lord?" Harry asked. He could be blunt, too.

Lucius winced. Then he took a deep, calming breath of his own and slid the paper across the table towards the boy. "Read this, Mr. Potter," he whispered. "Just the article on the front page. I think you'll understand."

Harry glanced down. He didn't need to read the article, actually. He needed only to read the headline, and to understand how very wrong he had been, to think that Connor was safe in Godric's Hollow and that he could stay away for the duration of the summer.

PETER PETTIGREW ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN

Harry could make out the picture beneath that, an old photograph in which Pettigrew, caught between two Aurors, jerked his head around in several directions as though looking for an escape. Harry knew it had to be him from his parents' descriptions, though he had never

seen a whole picture. Shortly after Peter's arrest, Sirius had gone through all the Marauders' old photos and cut the traitor out of them.

He put out his hand and concentrated. This was something he could let the magic destroy, and gladly.

It wound up doing an odd amalgamation of burning the newspaper, shredding it, and making it cease to exist. Harry gave himself fully over to that brief burst of power, and was the calmer for it when he recovered. He nodded and looked up at Lucius, who was leaning back from him. He did not breathe fast. His face was not paler than usual. But Harry could feel him nonetheless, poised to strike, and knew that Lucius truly had guessed how much danger he was in.

"Understand," Harry whispered. "I care for my safety. I would not have come here if I had thought I was in danger from you, or rather, that you cared more about my death than your son's happiness. But I care about my brother more than anything in the world, and it is the seventh of July now. I should be returning home soon."

"No, Harry. You aren't fully recovered yet."

Harry sighed as Draco rushed back into the room and put his arms around him. Draco meant well, of course, but he had just revealed what could be an important weakness in front of someone Harry still thought of as an enemy. Harry put a hand on his back and stared hard at Lucius over his son's head.

Lucius did not move. He did not say anything. He watched. His gray eyes had gone so blank and his face so still that Harry was no longer sure what he was feeling.

Harry turned his attention to comforting Draco, who was watching him pleadingly. "You've only been here for a month," he said. "We were going to celebrate your birthday in the Manor. The house elves were going make a special meal just for us, and you won't even believe the gift I bought for you. It'd be the first time that you had a birthday just to yourself, without Connor, wouldn't it?"

Harry smiled gently. "It would be," he said. "But Peter Pettigrew is free, Draco—“

Draco's face promptly took on a faintly guilty expression. Harry raised his eyebrows. "You knew about this?"

"I didn't want you to worry," said Draco artlessly. He let go of Harry, but moved around and sat in the chair beside him. "The wards on the Manor wouldn't let him through, and it's not as though you need to worry about him attacking you. Why would he want to hurt you?"

"That's the problem," said Harry. "He wants to hurt Connor. And for all I know, he could get through the wards around our house. Our parents have already proven that they can't protect us." The venom in his voice shocked him, but he forced himself to let it go and continue speaking rationally to Draco. Rationality had to penetrate that stubborn sulk some time. "I have to be there when Pettigrew arrives, just in case he tries to hurt Connor."

"He could already have Apparated there," Draco pointed out. "Please, Harry, I don't want you to worry about this." He leaned forward earnestly. "Wouldn't Connor have to protect himself sooner or later, anyway? Let him do it this once."

Harry sighed. "Can we go somewhere else, Draco?" he asked, looking towards Lucius.

Draco reached out and clenched his hand. "You can speak in front of him," he said. "He hasn't tried to hurt you, Harry. Mother and I have watched. You can trust him." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "I've read some of the older books, and I can recognize the truce gifts now. No one exchanges them up to this point if they mean to break off the treaty and hurt the other wizard." He looked at his father.

"Very good, Draco," said Lucius, in a polished voice. He was looking at Harry, and he didn't seem inclined to stop. "I am glad to see you furthering your education. It is indeed true that I have committed to an exchange of six truce gifts with Mr. Potter thus far. That leaves only ten. By this point, the two wizards are bound to continue, unless one of them sends the other an unmistakable sign to break off the

negotiations.” He paused, for effect, Harry was certain. “I have no intention of sending such a sign any time soon.”

Draco beamed at his father, then turned to Harry. “You wouldn’t end it, either, would you?” he whispered. “Please?”

Harry understood the impulse that led Draco to ask the question. After all, if Harry and his father were allies, there was no way at all that Draco would feel torn between them. Draco would never have to confront, fully, what Harry knew he was beginning to suspect: that Lucius had acted as a Death Eater of his own free will, without being under the Imperius Curse. He could follow through on the decision he’d made to face Tom Riddle at Harry’s side, without losing his family.

Harry knew that, if it came to an open break between them at the moment, Draco would choose him over his father.

There were no words for how much that knowledge honored him, and for how much it terrified him and made him sick to his stomach. He did not want that measure of control over another being’s life. He could hardly face ordering house elves around since the Chamber, and he knew that most of them (Dobby was an enigmatic exception) were frantically eager to serve. How could he put someone under compulsion when he’d been under it himself, from possession and the web in his head?

He did not want to. So he told the other thing, the secret he had been waiting to tell Draco until it became pressing.

“It’s not just Pettigrew’s escape, Draco,” he said softly. “I’m feeling a pull back to my brother.” He lifted his hand and touched the nape of his neck, tapping the back of his skull. He waited for the pain, and sighed in relief when nothing came. A week ago, doing that would have made reverberations race around his head for an hour. It seemed that he was finally beginning to heal. “The—the golden thing I told you about.” He was not yet ready to reveal to Lucius of all people that he had a web that glowed golden and had a voice like a phoenix’s in his mind. “It’s tugging at me, telling me to go home. I’m

already losing sleep and not feeling as hungry. I don't think it will stop until I'm back in the same house as Connor. I'm sorry," he added.

"But it didn't do that before," Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. "I know that. But it wasn't damaged then, and I think this is the way it's reasserting itself. I'm sorry," he repeated.

Draco dipped his head and gave a long sigh. "But your parents," he whispered. "Do you think that you can handle them?"

Harry nodded again. "I think so. As long as I exercise my magic, I can keep from hurting them. And since they'll ignore me anyway—" he'd told Draco about the Fugitivus Animus spell he'd cast on his parents that made them devote every bit of their attention and perception to Connor—"I should have plenty of time to practice my spells."

Draco bit his lip a few times more, then put his arms around Harry and held him tight. Harry embraced him back, and ignored the stare he could feel from Lucius's direction. Lucius wouldn't know if Harry was really showing affection, or only feigning it so that he wouldn't hurt Draco's feelings. Lucius knew nothing about the bottle he'd given Draco, which shone with the true emotions Harry felt towards him.

"I'll send you your birthday gift by post, then," Draco whispered. "I think I can do that."

Harry nodded. "Thank you." He drew back from Draco and turned to Lucius. "As I'm not old enough to Apparate by myself, Mr. Malfoy," he asked, "may I do you the trouble of asking you for a Portkey?"

Lucius opened his mouth to answer, but a cool voice from behind Harry said it for him. "I will give you one, of course, Harry. It's no trouble." Narcissa stepped in, stared hard at her husband, and then glanced down at him. "If you are sure that you must leave us?" she added, her smile sad.

Harry nodded. "I am, Mrs. Malfoy. Thank you for your hospitality. It's been wonderful here. If you can tune the Portkey to Diagon Alley, I'll owl Remus Lupin, who's a family friend, and ask him to meet me

there." It would do no good to try and tune a Portkey to Godric's Hollow, since Harry wasn't about to tell the elder Malfoys just where his brother lived, and the wards wouldn't let them through anyway.

"Not your parents?" Narcissa murmured, but she was already stepping out of the room to hunt for some object which might make a suitable Portkey, and didn't stay to listen to his answer.

"But tomorrow, right?" Draco whispered. "You won't leave today?" Now his smile was wan, at least until Harry nodded back to him. He grabbed Harry's hand. "Good. Then you'll have time to try and guess your birthday gift."

Harry blinked. "I thought you didn't want me to guess my birthday gift."

"I still want you to guess," said Draco, tugging him towards the door from the dining room. "I just don't want you to guess right."

Harry nodded, then glanced once at Lucius. The pull at the back of his head had eased the moment he spoke of going home to his brother, but he could still feel the other wizard's eyes slicing into him.

"It seems my son has found a true friend," Lucius said, his lips hardly moving. "It is such a wonder when one finds a friend this young, and such a shame when one loses them."

Harry inclined his head back. He could understand that statement well enough: it was the beginning of a new dance, and while Lucius would hardly break off the truce negotiations yet, that did not prevent him from doing anything else he took it into his head to do.

Harry had expected it. Lucius was still a Death Eater. And Connor was still the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry's brother.

And then there is Draco, thought Harry, as said obstacle gave a yank on his arm hard enough to nearly spill him to the floor. Who is always tugging me somewhere.

"Come on, Harry," said Draco, giving him another prompting pull. "It's even hidden in my bedroom. I'll blindfold you, and you try to find it."

Harry shook his head and yielded to the wonder of having such a friend as this, for a little while.

Chapter Two: The Cartographer

Harry listened as their mother read a book out to Connor, instructing him in history that he really should have learned last summer. He kept his eyes on his own book, one of the journals that Sirius had kept when he was still an Auror. It was “racy” reading, or at least Lily had said it was last year when Harry had asked if he could read it.

Now, he could read it, and no one seemed to notice or care. Lily or James could see the journal appearing to float off the shelf, and they would blink and frown before simply deciding that it was a sign of Connor’s developing wandless magic. They were able to attribute just about any strange event around the house to Connor. The Fugitivus Animus spell was still in operation.

It didn’t seem to work as well on Sirius, perhaps because he didn’t visit Godric’s Hollow as often. Sometimes Harry thought that his godfather could almost see him. He blinked and squinted often enough, as though he stared into the sun. But aside from a few whispered questions of “Harry?” that Harry could ignore easily, he never tried to do anything about it.

Remus was a different matter, since he hadn’t been in the room when Harry cast the spell to darken his existence in Lily’s, James’s, and Sirius’s minds. He could speak to Harry normally when he came over, leading to a delicate series of maneuvers on Harry’s part to keep the werewolf from revealing the whole game. As it was, Remus had been getting more suspicious lately. Harry was just as glad that Remus would spend the rest of the summer at Hogwarts. The Wolfsbane Potion had finally been perfected, and Dumbledore had asked Remus to come and join the teaching staff as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor (Lockhart having been sacked with relatively little ceremony). Remus was there now, readying himself for the position and learning how to function while on the potion.

He had been here on their birthday, and had been the only one to see the gift Harry received from Draco Malfoy.

Harry felt himself relax as he thought of Draco, and leaned his head on his arm. He could rest. It wasn’t as though Lily would flutter about

him the way she used to, scolding him to study and exhorting him to think of what might happen to his brother if he didn't.

He paused, startled. I didn't know I remembered that.

And yet there the memory was, spread in front of him like a stained-glass butterfly. He had studied on his own, voraciously, striving always for some new bit of knowledge that might let him protect Connor. But when he flagged, Lily had encouraged him, sometimes guilted him, into it.

She should have done that to Connor instead. He's the one who's going to need the knowledge.

Harry drew in his breath as he felt the book he held began to chill beneath his fingers. Connor gave him a quick concerned glance across the room. Harry managed to hold his smile and nod at his twin until Connor turned back to his studying with their mother, reassured.

Harry took the journal quietly upstairs, to their bedroom. His web, or what remained of it, was satisfied as long as he remained in the same house as his brother. But when he felt his magic leaking around his control, then he had to get away from their parents. So far, he had nearly turned James's hand to ice, nearly broken Lily's arm, and nearly sent both of them tumbling to cracked skulls or worse when his magic froze some patch on the stairs. That last one distressed Harry particularly. It seemed that his power not only found some way around all the controls he tried to place on it, but could do so without his immediately sensing it. He had to check the steps several times a day now, to be sure that there wasn't some nasty, vicious trap there, courtesy of Harry Potter.

He ground his teeth as he completed his latest careful survey of the stairs and retreated to their bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind him. The guilt was lashing him now. Harry wished he could speak about it. He wrote to Snape, but that wasn't enough. Connor wouldn't understand. And Harry had to pick and choose what he wrote in his letters to Draco, since he could never be sure that Lucius wasn't reading his post.

He hesitated for a long moment, then charmed the door with Collorportus. Connor might come up and find it stuck, but that was better than him stepping into the storm of wild magic Harry suspected the room might become at any moment.

He bowed his head and wrapped his arms around it, breathing as deeply and evenly as he could. That wasn't either very deep or even. Pain woke in his mind as he tried to channel the emotions the way he always would have—either accepting them because they fit with what he expected to feel, or putting them into a box because he couldn't afford to feel them—and couldn't.

The webs of his mind were torn. He knew that. Sylarana, the Locusta snake who had helped him settle his emotions in the last few months before the end of second year, was dead. He knew that.

The webs of his mind were torn.

I cannot think the way I always thought.

Sylarana was dead.

One of the few people who understood me is gone.

None of that subdued the emotions he didn't know how to face, didn't know how to feel, guilt and anger at himself for feeling the guilt and guilt for the anger and anger for the guilt....

Harry let out a little sob. It had been a mistake to leave the Malfoys so early, he thought. He could have endured shortening sleep and less fulfilling meals for the sake of not seeing his parents every day and being faced with what they had done to him.

But why should I have to endure it? Why should I have to choose between suffering in body and suffering in mind? I never would have had to if my parents just hadn't placed this web in my mind.

But they did. And they had their reasons. They wanted to make me the perfect sacrifice. That was what I wanted to be. Why can't I

accept that it worked out that way, and would have continued working that way if Sylarana hadn't died?

I wish she were still alive.

How could she leave me?

She didn't leave you, you idiot. She got killed saving your sorry life.

Harry scrambled off the bed and hurried across the room, aiming for a cupboard low on the wall behind Connor's bed. Whatever he tried to store in his own cupboard got moved there, Lily simply assuming that any belongings in this room were Connor's. Luckily, his brother had protested that he wanted the second bed to remain, or Lily would have Vanished that, so convinced was she that she had only one son.

Now he pulled out a smooth glass figurine wrapped in silver cloth, pried the cloth away, and held the figurine to his bare skin. He calmed almost at once. He breathed deeply, and moved back to his own bed, lying with the glass snake on his chest.

This was Draco's gift to him, sent inside a large box that it had taken three owls to carry; somehow, Draco had thought packing the snake in layers and layers of cloth was safer than just binding it tightly into a small package. The serpent was half-rearing, its mouth closed, eyes half-shut. It shone with shifting colors that Harry recognized as Draco's own emotions towards him; in that way, the gift mimicked the bottle he'd given Draco. The serpent had hardly stopped shining deep purple, the color of protectiveness, since Harry returned home.

That hadn't been all, though, as a letter packed deep in the box had revealed. If Harry touched the serpent and said, "Portus," it would act as a Portkey and take him to Malfoy Manor, inside and through all the wards on the house.

Harry could barely imagine how Draco had set that up. It had probably involved his mother, since Harry couldn't imagine it was something Lucius would agree to. But he was grateful Draco had. The promise of escape, the chance being there even if he could not

grasp it, had returned him to a fragile pretense of sanity several times this summer.

Clutching the serpent, he drifted slowly off to sleep.
He woke to a knock on the door, and his brother's low voice. "Harry?
Will you let me in? I have something to show you."

Harry blinked and fumbled with his glasses for a moment before remembering he'd fallen asleep with them on, rather than taking them off. He sat up, muttered, "Finite Incantatem," at the door, and then turned over, once again clutching the serpent close. It was faintly warm, as though it had lain in the sun. Harry knew it was Draco's magic making it so. He found it more and more difficult to let go of each time he touched it.

"Thanks, Harry," said Connor, behind him. He slipped in and stood by the bed until Harry tilted his head in acknowledgement. Then he whispered, "Here," and pressed a piece of folded parchment into Harry's hand.

"What is this?" Harry asked, unfolding the parchment. It was blank, but so old that Harry thought it must have been written on at one time or another. Why carry around an old piece of paper that didn't have at least a line of memorable poetry?

"Watch," said Connor, and held out his wand. He tapped the center of the parchment and said, in a clear, commanding voice that Harry had also heard him practicing with Lily, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

Harry blinked in astonishment as the parchment abruptly swarmed with images, forming a picture of corridors, tunnels, and walls it took him only a moment to recognize.

Hogwarts.

Harry managed to swallow, and also to control the urge to throw the map away from him or clutch it close. "Thank you, Connor," he whispered. "What does it do?"

"Shows you people moving around the castle," Connor said promptly, indicating a dot on the map. Harry squinted at it and saw that it said Remus Lupin. He blinked. "You can tell if they're getting close to you, or if they're where they're supposed to be." He paused, and bit his lip. "Father made it, along with Remus and Sirius and—and Pettigrew."

Harry nodded tightly. Connor's voice sank on the last name, as it had since they heard of Peter's escape from Azkaban. It was not right that his brother be so afraid. Harry almost wanted Peter to come to Godric's Hollow at that point. He could use his magic to kill him, or scare him badly enough that he would never consider coming after Connor and completing his Lord's dirty work.

"Why give it to me, though?" he asked, lifting his eyes and studying Connor's face intently.

"A few reasons," said Connor, and shifted his arm. Harry blinked again as it vanished. "First, I have this, and I thought you would want the map so that you could keep track of me." He swept something that sparkled faintly around himself with a flourish. "Father finally decided I was old enough for the Invisibility Cloak," he said, from the middle of the place where his face had abruptly disappeared, and then pulled the Cloak off again.

Harry nodded slowly. "Thank you," he said. He would be frantic if he couldn't find Connor when he believed his brother might be in danger, and especially frantic if the Cloak meant he might walk right past him. "And what was the other reason?"

"It's fantastically complex magic," said Connor. "Mum showed me a picture of what the spells looked like that Father and the others used to make the map—the Marauder's Map, that's what they call it—but I could hardly make them out, and there were dozens I didn't recognize." He paused, as though considering how to word what he needed to say next. Harry just watched him, clutching both map and serpent close. "I thought," Connor said slowly, "that you could use your magic to work on making a map like that, or at least analyzing this one. That would give it something to do. Something creative. You said you didn't want to do anything destructive." His eyes fastened on

Harry's face again, as though he hoped that Harry hadn't changed his mind about wanting to destroy things.

Harry smiled. For the first time since he came home, it felt like he, himself, was behind the smile, and not some anonymous smiler. "Thank you, Connor," he whispered. "But how do I make the map vanish again? It might be important."

Connor tapped the map with his wand again, and said, "Mischief managed." The image of Hogwarts sank into the parchment and vanished.

"Thank you," Harry repeated. It was inadequate as an answer to what Connor had done for him, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Connor abruptly hugged him. Harry froze with astonishment, but his brother held the embrace until he reached up and wound his arms around Connor's shoulders in return. Then Connor backed off and peered at him.

"I hate to see you suffering," he said. "I know that I can't do anything about a lot of it, but I could do this. Promise me that you'll actually use the map and your magic, so that you won't go crazy or—or do anything else." He was trusting enough not to think that Harry would actually murder their parents, Harry supposed.

"Thank you, Connor," Harry whispered back. His voice came out steadier this time, and for the first time since he came home, he also got an absolutely genuine smile from his brother.

"Good," said Connor. "Now I have to study these books that Mum wants me to read. Do you know how many Goblin Wars there have been?"

"Seventeen," Harry said automatically.

Connor wrinkled his nose back at him. "Yes, you would," he said, but with no malice in his voice, and then went to his own cupboard to retrieve the books that Lily wanted him to look at.

Harry lay back on his bed and began studying the map. He already had several projects in mind, but he wasn't sure if they would work. When he let control of his own magic go enough to examine the spells on the map, he sighed in contentment. Yes, there was more than enough here to keep him busy.

Harry kicked the bed, then reminded himself to keep silent. Connor was sleeping, and Harry wasn't to keep him up simply because he had better things to do than sleep. He glanced from the Marauder's Map to the other, seemingly blank piece of parchment that he'd enchanted. Tonight was one of the last chances he'd have to make the test. Tomorrow they were going to Diagon Alley—Connor had finally managed to convince their parents that, yes, he needed to go there and purchase two of everything they'd need for the third year at Hogwarts, just in case something happened to his books or robes or cauldron—and in the days after that, Harry would prepare himself as best as he could for his sudden reintroduction to large groups of people, and what he would do when he saw Dumbledore again.

His breath became visible in front of him, and he heard Connor shiver and snuggle further under the blankets. He forced his anger away. Yes, his rage still burned cold at the thought of the Headmaster, but it was always doing that. He would just have to put up with it.

He made his mind bright and shiny and clear again, and then tapped the Marauder's Map and whispered, "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." The map gleamed into place. Harry nodded, then touched his own parchment, let his breath out, and murmured, "I solemnly swear I will protect my brother."

And, for the first time, it worked, the lines that Harry wanted springing into place on his own parchment. Harry snorted and shook his head. All the work he'd done, trying to duplicate the spells in the Map just so that his own would function, and it turned out that the trigger phrase was the key. He had to have a phrase to bring up and hide his map that was like the phrases the Marauder's Map used.

Harry rolled on his back, his Lumos spell illuminating the map's surface. It showed the house at Godric's Hollow and the area around it inside the isolation wards. He could see the dots labeled "Lily

Potter" and "James Potter" inside their parents' bedroom. He carefully tore his eyes away from them. He could not afford to stare too long, or he would become violently angry. His rage was still the hardest of all his emotions to control. He was glad for the Fugitivus Animus spell right now, as there were times he thought he would have killed his parents if they had spoken to him.

There were the motionless dots labeled "Harry Potter" and "Connor Potter" in their bedroom, and a dot labeled "Sirius Black" in the guest bedroom downstairs. Harry nodded. Good. This works. And it means I ought to be able to create maps of other places. Wherever Connor might go, he needed to have a map that showed that place.

He was about to tap the parchment with his wand and whisper, "Guardianship achieved" to clean the image off when he saw another dot abruptly appear near the edges of the isolation wards. Harry paused and tilted the map back towards his Lumos. Had Remus come back from Hogwarts? He would watch the progress of the dot, if so, just to make absolutely sure his spells had worked.

But the dot was labeled "Peter Pettigrew."

Harry felt his breath coming short, and he sat up, staring at the map and trying to figure out if he was seeing it wrong. But no. The writing was clear, and did not waver as the dot moved across the grass towards the house.

How had Peter got through the wards? They were tuned to the Potter family and to Sirius and Remus only—

No, they aren't, Harry thought abruptly, remembering what James had said about them long ago. They're tuned to the Marauders. And Peter is still that.

Harry bared his teeth. He felt his magic rise around him, hissing through the familiar channels inside his body, glad to have a target it could use. He nodded, once, and then gathered up his map and headed for the door.

He could wake their parents or Sirius, he knew. They would be able to defend Connor. And Peter would run at the sight of them, as he wouldn't run at the sight of one boy wizard approaching him with just a wand.

Just a wand.

Harry felt his rage stretch lazy claws inside him, and smiled. He stepped through the front door and shut it behind him. He could not see Peter yet, but he suspected it was just a matter of time. He leaned his back against the wall of the house and breathed deeply. It was a fine, clear night, with the nearly full moon hovering overhead, and a scent in the air like flowers, though Harry couldn't see any of them, either.

He kept his gaze trained ahead of himself, and saw the grass rustle and move to the side, along with a glimpse of his Lumos shining off a hairless tail.

"Show yourself, Pettigrew," he said calmly, and lifted his wand to point directly at Peter. Of course, if he was foolish enough to watch that instead of the wandless magic Harry could unleash to much more permanent destruction, that was his problem. "I know you're here."

He half-expected the rat to squeak and run, but it didn't happen. Instead, a moment passed, and then Peter Pettigrew transformed to human.

Harry bared his teeth again, wondering if Peter would think he was smiling. Again, if he does, that's his mistake.

He moved a step forward, feeling the dew-heavy grass soak his ankles, and studied Peter. For the most part, he matched the descriptions he'd heard Sirius and James give, their voices choked with grief and hatred.

Small...fat...always tagging behind us...had to have our help to learn the Animagus transformation...we felt sorry for him...watery

eyes...he always looked away from someone who wanted to confront him about something he'd done...he was jealous of James...hated Sirius...foul traitor...Death Eater...should have known that if anyone was going to be a Death Eater, it would be him...

There were two things that were different about this Peter, though. Harry could see that he was thin, his clothes—which he'd probably stolen—hanging on him. Of course, he would have dropped weight after twelve years in Azkaban.

The other thing was his gaze. When he raised his head and met Harry's eyes, Harry actually recoiled a step. Peter's eyes were blue, and so piercing that Harry felt scraped to the bone by them.

He recovered himself quickly, of course. It wouldn't do to let Peter, Pettigrew, Wormtail, think he was weak and couldn't protect his brother. He held his wand out before him and waited for the first blast of magic.

Instead, Peter nodded and said, in a voice that reminded Harry of Lucius Malfoy's, "Harry."

"Wormtail," said Harry. The nickname didn't make Peter flinch, though. He just went on watching. His hands were frozen near his sides, and Harry supposed that was another way that he had changed in the last twelve years. Before, as Sirius had emphasized when describing Peter, he would always have fidgeted and washed his hands together, resembling the way a rat washed its paws.

"Do you know why I came here?" Peter asked, finally, when they had passed some minutes in silence.

"To kill Connor," said Harry. "The way that you tried to when you betrayed him to Voldemort." He ignored Peter's flinch at the Dark Lord's name. Snape was the same way, and even Draco. They all preferred calling him by his title. Harry thought that was silly. "It won't work. I'm going to stand in your way, and I'm going to kill you if you try to touch him." He brought his magic up, swirling and roaring, cold music that frosted the grass around him and broke the air into small pieces.

Peter shook his head. “That’s not the reason I escaped,” he said. “I didn’t come here for him.”

“For whom, then?” Harry curled his lip and took a step forward. He felt strong, powerful, ready to strike in a way he hadn’t all summer. This was an enemy. Harry was justified in whatever he did to him. This was the kind of battle that Lily had specifically trained him for, the kind where Connor’s inherent innocence and compassion might blind him and make him leave the enemy alive. Where justice had to take place, rather than mercy, Harry could become the executioner.

“For you,” said Peter. He tilted his head to the side. “I thought, when I saw the announcement in the newspapers about the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived going to the Malfoys’ for the summer, that something like this might have happened. And I see that it has.” His voice was deep with a sadness Harry did not understand. “I knew—well, I should have known, after that night when V-Voldemort attacked, but I couldn’t remember for the longest time, you see.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Harry asked as calmly as he could. His wand wasn’t trembling. His magic was, ready to lunge and strike. Harry didn’t know if he could control it much longer, and neither was he sure that he wanted to. Peter would, of course, lie, or else he would have gone insane after twelve years in Azkaban. No one stayed sane that long there.

Of course, no one’s ever escaped from the prison before, either, Harry thought, and went on listening.

Peter let out a breath, then another, and then said, “Harry, I betrayed your parents on Dumbledore’s orders.”

Harry shook his head at once. “No,” he said. “That’s not true. You were a Death Eater. Let me see your left arm.”

Peter pushed the sleeve of his stolen robe up at once, and Harry saw the dark gleam of the skull and snake. He hissed, one hand rising to his forehead, where his scar had abruptly blazed with pain.

"See," Harry said with gritted teeth through the agony. "You're a Death Eater. You served Voldemort."

"I became a Death Eater because Dumbledore asked me to," said Peter, his eyes unearthly. "The Dark Lord approached me because he believed I would be jealous, being in my friends' shadows all the time. When I went to Dumbledore, he saw it as the perfect opportunity to have a spy. Snape hadn't turned his back on the Dark Lord then. And then, when I had the chance to become Lily and James's Secret Keeper, Dumbledore said I had to take it. He explained about the prophecy to me. And he explained about something else to me, too. That was the real reason he wanted me to become everything I did, to betray your parents and go to Azkaban. I was a sacrifice, Harry, even as you were—"

Harry abruptly went to his knees, crying out in pain. The phoenix light and song had blazed up in his mind again, as though the crippled web sensed an enemy and was fighting frantically to involve itself in one last battle.

Peter was speaking, but Harry couldn't hear him beyond the pressure of the fire. Then a hand touched his shoulder, and Peter's voice cut off, and Harry felt the agony steadily retreat. He took a deep breath and stood.

He leaped backward when he saw that Peter was the one who had touched him, and pointed his wand at him again. Peter lifted his hands and backed away.

"I should have known that would happen," Peter breathed. "It was the web, wasn't it? The phoenix web? I just broke free of mine a few months ago, and that's why I was able to escape—"

Harry's vision flashed gold again. "Stop," he managed to say through a clenched jaw.

"My apologies," said Peter softly. "I can't tell you everything you need to know, Harry, because the web will prevent you from listening if I do. But I'll find a way to help you break it. I swear I'll find a way to help you break it. That was the reason I escaped when I did. I could have

rotted and died in Azkaban, or just run away. Merlin knows I've paid all my debts to them." His eyes shone viciously as he said that, and Harry had the feeling he was seeing the Death Eater. "But if you were suffering from this too, then I wanted to help you. As one sacrifice to another—twelve years is enough, I think. You don't have to listen to them anymore, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "I don't believe you," he whispered.

"Of course you don't," said Peter gently. "Not yet."

"No, I mean—I mean I won't believe you," Harry said, bringing his wand up. It wavered. He despised himself for his weakness, but he couldn't seem to stop it. "Why would you agree to go along with that, if it really happened?"

"Because Dumbledore is persuasive," said Peter, shrugging. "And for other reasons that I can't tell you yet without causing your web to cause you pain."

"But my parents never knew—"

"Yes, they did," said Peter quietly. "They knew, and—"

"Harry!"

Harry spun around abruptly. Sirius was rushing out of the house, his head low to the ground and his body already rippling with the first signs of his Animagus transformation. His next cry was as much a bark as a shout. "Wormtail!"

By the time Harry turned around again, Peter had transformed and was running. He scurried across the ground, aiming for the edge of the wards. In a few moments, Sirius, now a large black dog, had caught up with him, but though his head dipped several times and then rose again, he seemed to miss Peter each time. Harry watched, his head aching and his wand still shaking in his hand. He noticed it, and forced his fingers to steady.

Sirius came back in a few moments, his growl rumbling up from his throat. Harry didn't have to look at his jaws to know that he hadn't caught Peter. He swallowed, unsure what to feel.

"I betrayed your parents on Dumbledore's orders."

That couldn't be true. It wasn't true. It had to not be true.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry looked up into Sirius's face as he transformed again. The Fugitivus Animus spell didn't seem to be working any more, if the way that his godfather's eyes were fastened on him was any indication. "You can see me?"

Sirius gave him a puzzled glance. "Of course. Why?"

Harry shook his head. The spell never had worked as well on Sirius. He supposed he would just have to put up with it. "Nothing," he said. "And yes, I'm fine. I just came out to get some air, and he was there."

"Talking nonsense, I bet," Sirius muttered. "Trying to get you to join up with the Death Eaters, was he?"

"He told me some things—"

Sirius tensed like a twig about to snap. Harry wondered why.

"But it was all nonsense," Harry assured him quickly. "I didn't believe him."

Sirius let out a loud breath and hugged him. "Thank Merlin for that," he said. "Now, come back inside. I'm going to wake up your fool of a father and tell him to adjust the wards."

Harry nodded and fell into step beside Sirius, letting his godfather lead him back to his bedroom. He deliberately didn't think about anything until he was back under the covers, with Connor snoring heavily, reassuringly, across the room.

"It was the web, wasn't it? The phoenix web? I just broke free of mine a few months ago..."

That was the thing that troubled Harry the most, and on two accounts. First, he wondered if a phoenix web—if that was what it was—placed in someone's mind could cause that person to lie his way through the Veritaserum the Aurors would have used when they tried Peter. After all, if someone under the web believed what he was saying were true, the Veritaserum would find only truth.

And the second thing...

Harry rolled over and punched his pillow. You know that what he said wasn't true. Go to sleep, damn you.

And the second thing...

Harry buried his face under the blankets, but his thoughts would not stop racing.

Harry was trying to get used to thinking of himself as a sacrifice again, the way he had unquestioningly before the damage that Tom Riddle and Sylarana's death had inflicted on his mind. He had chosen it. He had trained for it. It was what he was. Eventually, he would have to reconcile himself to that, rage at his parents and Dumbledore or not. What he had learned about his own mind and magic did nothing to diminish Connor's need for protection.

But what if they had sacrificed other people, too? What if Peter had spent twelve years in Azkaban, scorned by his friends, as a living sacrifice? What if Harry wasn't the only person Dumbledore had manipulated?

He was not sure how he felt about that.

Golden light roared across his eyelids, and Harry turned his attention away from the thoughts. He had to rest, had to relax, or his head would hurt.

And besides, Sirius was right and what Peter had said was nonsense, designed to trick Harry and lure him away from his brother's side.

Just nonsense, Harry repeated to himself until he fell asleep. Just nonsense, all of it.

Chapter Three: Hawthorn and Rue

Sirius's hand clenched hard on Harry's arm as they came out of the Apparition and into Diagon Alley. Harry stepped away from him and took a few deep breaths. He never had liked Side-Along Apparition. It made him feel as though his stomach were being squeezed out through his ears.

Sirius glanced over at him anxiously. "All right there, Harry?"

Harry conjured a smile and nodded. Sirius had been solicitous this morning, as though to make up for ignoring Harry during the rest of the summer. Harry's skin was crawling with all the unexpected attention. He needed to get away from Sirius. He knew that he meant well, and he knew that he would have to face even more people at Hogwarts, but those people generally weren't in the habit of trying to check him for injuries and ask him if he wanted sweets at the same time.

"Connor," Lily was saying as she unfolded the list that had come with his Hogwarts letter. Connor took the chance to pass his own Hogwarts letter to Harry. It had arrived to utterly blank looks from their parents, until Connor told them that the school had probably sent two copies to him by mistake. Then they'd smiled and nodded, seeming to see Connor's name on it. "I think we should go to Flourish and Blotts first. It looks like you need more books this year."

Harry let out a little breath of relief. He could head in the opposite direction, then, and no one would think it strange. Connor gave him a sympathetic look, and then beamed up at their mother.

"That would be fine, Mum."

Lily and James herded Connor away. Harry started to turn away, only to be halted by Sirius's hand clamping on his shoulder. His magic gave a little wet snarl in his ears, and Harry felt the power battering under his skin. It was just looking for a chance to escape and hurt someone. Harry told himself firmly that it wasn't getting the chance this time, and shut it up again before he attended to what Sirius was saying.

"Where do you think you're going, Harry?" his godfather asked. "I think you should have someone with you, just in case Wormtail attacks you again."

"He probably wouldn't want to attack me," said Harry, summoning up a calm mask to cover his face, which really wanted to stretch in surprised panic. He needed to get away from Sirius. He needed some time among strangers. Even the people who were detouring around them now, staring hard at him as if they thought he was his brother, made him feel a little better than he had when trapped at home. "He came for Connor. He'd just want to spout more nonsense at me."

"And you wouldn't listen, right?" Sirius's fingers flexed and drove down hard enough that Harry thought he would probably have bruises tomorrow.

"Of course not," said Harry. "Like you said, it's just nonsense, and I know better than to listen to Death Eaters. They're all liars, just like Voldemort was when he talked to me at the end of first year."

Sirius let out a little breath and pried his fingers off Harry's shoulder. "If you're sure..."

"I'm sure, Sirius." Harry flashed him a brave little smile that he'd perfected a few days ago. "I'll meet you back here in a couple of hours, all right?"

Sirius nodded. Then he opened his mouth, and a shadow fell across his face. Harry braced himself. Sirius hadn't asked about the spell on Lily and James yet. Every moment he looked like this, Harry thought he might.

But, once again, he shut his mouth and turned away. Harry watched him blend with the crowds in the Alley, heading towards Quality Quidditch Supplies, and shook his head. He didn't know whether Sirius was hesitating because he thought it was ridiculous for there to be a spell or for it to be Harry's fault, or because he didn't want to confront the reason why Harry had cast the spell.

Harry wanted to think it was the first, but he suspected it was the second. That made him bitter at Sirius, and that made him uneasy. Yes, Sirius had been a Gryffindor, and that meant that he should have some courage. But there were all different kinds of courage. Was it really fair to demand that he should have this kind?

Harry shrugged and turned away to consult the shopping list on his letter. He was no more eager to confront the question than Sirius was. Harry stepped out of Eeylops Owl Emporium and paused to tuck the bags of owl treats he'd bought for Hedwig in his pocket. Someone nearly knocked into him as he did so, and Harry had to stagger back and catch himself against the wall of the shop. The person turned around to apologize. Harry blinked.

"Pansy?" he asked. He had thought that all his Slytherin Housemates would have finished their shopping earlier than this late in the summer.

Pansy Parkinson gave him a distracted nod and glanced around, her eyes constantly moving through the crowd. "Hi, Harry. Have you seen a little girl holding an ice cream sundae and shrieking something about elk?"

Harry blinked again. "Um. No."

Pansy gave a withering sigh. "I thought so. That's my little cousin, Aurora," she explained, to Harry's blank glance. "I was supposed to watch her, and I met Millicent, and I only turned aside for a second, and then when I turned back, she was gone." She ground her teeth, and then abruptly stomped her foot. "Why do they always make the older children watch the younger ones? It's not as though I'm good at it just because I'm a girl."

Harry just shrugged. He was afraid he couldn't sympathize very much. His duty had been watching and protecting Connor ever since he could remember, even though his brother was only fifteen minutes younger than he was. To him, it was sacred, and it always slightly startled him to remember that there were people who disliked or resented doing it.

"There she is," Pansy said abruptly, and sprinted away. Harry turned, but could see only a glimpse of a small robe waving before Pansy blocked it. The childish howl that came a moment later, though, was probably a sign that she had caught her charge.

Harry shook his head and turned away. But he'd only got a few paces when another of his Housemates fell into step beside him.

"Potter."

It was Millicent Bulstrode. Harry found himself having to look further up at her than he had expected. Millicent had always been one of the tallest girls in their year, and she'd already grown a bit over the summer, it seemed. Millicent raised her brows in silent, mocking acknowledgement of his gaze, and then tilted her head, her eyes narrowed.

"Why are you by yourself?"

"Because I wanted to be, Bulstrode," said Harry. He kept his voice inoffensive, polite, even boring. Millicent sometimes seemed interested in what he was doing, and sometimes did not. She usually gave up and went away if he didn't seem to be doing anything that would inspire interest.

Not this time, it seemed. Millicent only smiled more widely and said, "What could cause the great Harry Potter to want to be by himself?"

Harry stared openly at her, unable to help it. "What?"

Millicent sighed dramatically and examined a hand, as though she were looking at her nails. Pansy would have pulled the gesture off better, Harry thought. She actually looked as if she cared about her appearance. Millicent's nails were as broken and ragged from biting as any boy's. "Sorry, Potter. When I get chattered at all summer about you, it becomes automatic to call you that."

"Who's been chattering at you about me?" Harry slipped one hand towards his robe pocket and found his wand there, safe and secure. If

he had to fend off a sudden attack of Death Eaters—and Millicent's father, at least, had been one of those accused of Death Eater activities and had pleaded that he was under the Imperius Curse—then he wanted to be ready. He was trying to force his magic to get used to his wand again, instead of simply lashing out from his body like wings and beating whoever it liked.

"Various people," said Millicent, with a vague gesture that seemed to encompass the whole Alley. "Relatives. Not-relatives. Friends. House elves. You know how it is."

Harry jerked a little at the mention of house elves. Dim as twilight, a memory came to him from the end of last year, when Dobby had been muttering to him about being a vates of some kind. But Harry had pushed it away and refused to consider it, since none of the house elves at Malfoy Manor—even Dobby—had tried to speak to him about it again, and his own family had no elves.

"Tell me what you mean, Millicent," he said, deliberately switching to use of her first name. He drew his wand out so that she could see it. "Are you threatening me? Is this an offering of alliance? Do you just mean to tease me? What?"

"It's mainly an attempt to make you see that I'm not stupid," said Millicent, stopping and turning to face him. She sounded as if she were speaking with disarming honesty, but Harry was sure that was only another mask. "I can see what things are, you know. I can see what's what. And no one could have missed last year that you were the one blazing with power in the hospital wing. It wasn't your brother, and that story that he told about defeating the basilisk in the Chamber was just a bit too constructed. Why would Fawkes have flown the Sword of Gryffindor to him? Why wouldn't Dumbledore have come himself to battle the Dark Lord?"

Harry shook his head. "It's not like that," he said, and could feel his head aching and his sight blurring from the strain. He didn't think it was the phoenix web, but more the thought that someone else might not support and believe Connor. "You have no idea what it was really like."

"But I know who can tell us," said Millicent, and her gaze was direct. "I know who wants to believe a new story, and I can arrange for you to tell them that story. Who knows? The truth might even soothe their fear, and they might fall into line behind your precious Boy-Who-Lived the way you want them to."

Harry blinked. "You would really be able to arrange a meeting between us?"

Millicent nodded. "We've had someone watching Diagon Alley each day, hoping it would be the day you came to get your supplies," she said, and then turned and let out a soft little whistle in the direction of the shadows between the Emporium and the magical instruments shop.

Harry stiffened as several cloaked and masked figures emerged into the light. Their hoods were sufficiently lowered that they didn't need the masks, but Harry could see them anyway, and they were white. Though the cloaks were dark green instead of black, they looked enough like Death Eaters that he drew his wand.

"None of that," said Millicent, clamping onto his arm and forcing it down with unusual strength. "Play nice, Potter. They just want to know what really happened in the Chamber. That's all."

Harry breathed deeply for a few moments, considering the Death Eaters, or former Death Eaters, or whoever they were. They remained motionless and watched him. Harry could not even hear them breathing. He wondered what they wanted, if they really would go away after they heard his story, and why it seemed to matter to them so much.

After a moment, he decided he might as well tell them. At worst, it would make them see that, powerful as Harry might be, he was loyal to his brother, and get rid of any thoughts about them using him as a pawn in their games. At best, it would focus their attention on him and make them attack him instead of Connor. Harry would almost welcome that. He didn't want to kill anyone, but his magic could use the exercise.

"All right," said Harry.

He told the story as simply as he could, because he was afraid that any attempt to add emotion or humanity to his chill tone would involve tears. He froze the tears deep, and spoke of Sylarana's death, and how that had suddenly freed his magic. He did not tell them about the damage to his mind, but represented Sylarana as the kind of familiar who had been a large part of taming his magic, so that it went wild without her presence and sought some new container. He told about the ice and how he had destroyed the diary and sucked out the fragment of Tom Riddle, absorbing his power. At that, one of the cloaked figures on the far end gave a sharp sound and made a movement that might have involved the drawing of a wand, if another cloaked figure hadn't checked him.

Harry finished up with the storm, and how Professor Snape had come out and chided him into putting his magic away and coming back into the school. He certainly was not about to reveal how fragile his sanity was, even now.

"Why did Connor believe the way he did?" Millicent demanded.

Harry shook his head. "Because he wanted to," he said. "It was the best explanation he could come up with for what had happened." He wasn't going to reveal that he had Obliviated his brother, either.

"And Draco?" Millicent asked, the one question he had really not wanted her to ask.

Harry held his wand high enough that they could see it. "Ask about him again, and I'll hex you," he said. He thought he knew who the cloaked figures were now—former Death Eaters, Slytherins, the kind of people who might associate with Lucius Malfoy more than casually. Harry was not about to tell them that Draco had chosen to stand with him against Tom Riddle and had been vital in trying to burn the diary, either. Draco's allegiance was their secret until he was ready to announce it to the world. It was no secret where Connor stood, or Harry, either.

Millicent put her hands up. "Calm down, Potter," she murmured, but her voice had the sound of deep satisfaction, not mockery. She stepped up to the cloaked figure at the farthest end of the line, the one who had stopped the first from drawing his wand, and leaned against him. The others turned and melted away into the shadows once more. Harry closed his eyes, trying to control his magic, and listening for the sounds of an attack in the moments he needed to recover himself.

When he opened his eyes, no one had attacked him, and the figure Millicent had leaned against had stripped his mask off. He was a dark-haired man with a large, blunt face, and Millicent's piercing eyes.

Harry inclined his head slowly, never looking away from the wizard's face. The man nodded, a faint smile gleaming between his hooked nose and thick lips.

"My name is Adalrico Bulstrode," he said. "Former Death Eater, as you doubtless have guessed by now. Under the Imperius Curse," he added.

"Of course," said Harry, letting politeness and nothing else season his voice.

Adalrico chuckled. "My daughter did not mention how careful you were," he said, and squeezed Millicent's shoulder with rough affection. "She should have." He leaned closer, staring into Harry's eyes. "You have given a confession, and the old ways say that a secret for a secret is the way of things, yes? So. There is a force abroad in the land, a force that is trying to bring back Voldemort."

Harry stood a little straighter, noting how Adalrico had used the Dark Lord's name instead of his title. "I already knew that, Mr. Bulstrode," he said softly. "I have expected someone to try and bring back Voldemort since my brother and I came to Hogwarts."

Adalrico cocked his head slyly to one side. "Ah. But did you know that that force is gaining new momentum now? There are those who have been hurt in trying to resist it, in trying to move slowly, in trying to make sure that we are ready before anything happens. And we do

not like that." The hand not holding his daughter made a convulsive gesture.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He could not ask outright, of course, if this really meant that some of the Death Eaters—former Death Eaters, he corrected himself firmly—would be interested in an alliance. That would be losing an important step in this dance. But he could hint at it. "That is unfortunate," he said. "I am sorry for those who have been hurt, Mr. Bulstrode. I would like to ask you that carry my condolences to them. And any skill at healing that I might offer, of course. I have been training in medical magic, you know."

Adalrico's eyes shone with the same fierce enjoyment that Harry had seen in Narcissa Malfoy's face when he danced with her. "That is kind of you, Mr. Potter," he said, trying to keep his voice perfectly grave and failing. "Do your skills extend to healing bruises and contusions only? Or might they go further than that?"

"Further than that, I believe, sir," said Harry, and inclined his head modestly. "Of course, to know how to heal a certain affliction, then I have to see what that infliction is first, and how much damage it has done."

Adalrico nodded to him. "Perfectly reasonable," he said, and glanced over his shoulder. "Don't you think so?"

There was a long pause, and then the shadows stirred again, and one of the figures moved back out into the sunlight. With heavy, reluctant movements, he removed his mask—no, Harry corrected as he caught sight of the face, she removed her mask.

"Pansy?" Harry asked in wonder, before realizing that this had to be her mother. He squinted at her, and recalled her name a moment later. Hawthorn Parkinson. "Mrs. Parkinson," he said, and bowed to her. "I am sorry to hear that you have been hurt."

"So was everyone else." Hawthorn Parkinson was as pale-haired as her daughter, as pale of skin, but her eyes were unlike Pansy's blue, being shadowed hazel. Her face carried the deep-carved lines of some great strain, and her body was coiled as though she might

explode in any direction at any moment. Despite that, Harry thought, she was managing to force some dry humor into her voice. “Of course, none of them truly promised to do anything about it. Sorrow was the only balm they felt able to offer me.”

Harry studied her again, looking for some sign of an injury or curse, and then realized what else, beyond her face, seemed so familiar about her. He hesitated, then took a risk. He might be revealing too much, but on the other hand, he was revealing his intelligence—which they would need to be convinced of if they entered into an alliance with him.

“How long have you been a werewolf, Mrs. Parkinson?” he asked gently.

Hawthorn jerked, one hand flying up in front of her as if to defend herself from a curse with bare skin, while the other fumbled for her wand. Harry merely waited. Two wands were aimed at him, now, he saw, rolling his eyes to the side to check that Adalrico was armed. That was somewhat of a relief. He would have been disappointed if they weren’t.

“How did you—“ Hawthorn asked, and the low snarl in her voice only confirmed it further for Harry.

“I’ve known werewolves,” said Harry. “How long?”

Hawthorn lowered her head and said, “Since last month, when Fenrir Greyback attacked me for refusing to cooperate in his futile attempts to raise the Dark Lord. This next full moon is my first transformation.” Her eyes reflected rage and horror and utter fear. Harry could understand. For a pureblood witch, raised with the idea that werewolves were always halfbreeds and monsters and that only stupid or worthless people became them, this was a living nightmare.

“I could help, you know,” said Harry. “Have you heard of the Wolfsbane Potion?”

The brief flicker of hope in Hawthorn's eyes showed that either she had, or she had not but suspected what it would do. She clasped one hand around her wand. "A cure?" she whispered.

"Not as such," said Harry. "There is no cure for lycanthropy yet, Mrs. Parkinson. This is a potion that allows a werewolf to retain his or her senses in animal form. You'll still transform, but you won't be a ravening beast."

Hawthorn closed her eyes and nodded. "That is the best I can hope for," she whispered. "I would never forgive myself if I attacked my daughter."

"How can you get it to her?" Adalrico asked. "How can you brew it?"

"Some is going to be brewed at Hogwarts this year," said Harry. He was being blunt, but so were they. He only had to insure that he didn't betray other people's secrets, which weren't his to betray. "Professor Severus Snape finally perfected the formula. I helped him on some of the preliminary stages. I can learn to brew it, and I can give it to Pansy, if you're able to meet her somewhere on school grounds."

They were silent for a long moment. Harry thought they were wondering whether to trust him, and painted his most open and guileless expression on his face.

Then Hawthorn Parkinson said, fighting to keep her voice steady and almost succeeding, "If you do that, Mr. Potter, I will owe you a debt so profound that it cannot—" She cut herself off and shook her head. "What will you want?" she asked. "What is in my hands to give, I will provide with open palms."

Harry hissed before he could stop himself. That was an ancient saying, one that even pureblood families didn't use all that often, probably because deep and trusting alliances between them were uncommon. One trusted family first, and outsiders only if one had to.

"Is it true that you're a Parselmouth?" Adalrico asked abruptly.

Harry nodded at him. "It is." He ignored Millicent's outraged mutter to her father about his not trusting her, and glanced back at Pansy's mother. "I'll ask for a truce as long as I provide you with the potion, Mrs. Parkinson. You said that Fenrir Greyback bit you for refusing to cooperate with him?"

Hawthorn nodded, her eyes distant. "What he is doing is stupid," she growled softly. The tense, wild aura around her grew stronger. "It would never work, and for him to demand my help when—" She shook her head. "It does not matter."

Harry nodded. "I'll ask that you continue to refuse him for as long as I provide you with the potion," he refined his original request. "I don't know exactly what he wants, and I will not ask unless you want to tell me. But if you continue to refuse, that's one less enemy whom my brother must face on the battlefield."

Hawthorn smiled, slowly, and Harry saw a shadow of the lovely, commanding woman she must be when in full possession of herself. "That is well enough. And gladly, even easily, given." She cocked her head to the side. "You are sure that you do not want something else in addition to that?"

"No, Mrs. Parkinson," said Harry. Let them think me generous. Let me have a little extra space, if I need it, to maneuver and win concessions for Connor. "Let's not weight the bough of our union with snow it cannot carry."

Hawthorn laughed, a soft, delighted sound, and put out a hand. Harry clasped it, and then added, "I'm afraid that I won't be able to provide the potion for this first transformation, since I won't be at Hogwarts until the first day of September."

"That does not matter," said Hawthorn, her voice gone warm. "I know how to handle this first transformation, what to do and where I must go. But to know that the others will make me safer—that I need not abandon my daughter or lose control of myself to the beast within me—" She shook her head, and apparently was unable to say anything more.

Harry nodded to her, and then glanced at Adalrico and Millicent. "With all due respect, sir, did you really seek me out because you thought I could cure Mrs. Parkinson's disease? You couldn't have known that I would know anything about it."

Adalrico smiled, a deep, predatory expression that Harry had to admire for the sheer weight of glee behind it. "No, we did not," he said. "But needs must when the devil drives. We wanted to see what a powerful young wizard might have to offer us, and we have seen it now."

Harry inclined his head. "Of course," he murmured, "family is still most important, especially blood family." He could not make a clearer statement of his loyalty to Connor without being insulting, he thought.

Adalrico held up a hand as if toasting him with an imaginary wineglass. "I could not agree more, Mr. Potter. And when blood family and similar principles come together, then there is the happiest union of all. But bonds on principle alone may form between people of varying families, as they did in the case of Calypso McGonagall and Thomas Mackenzie."

Harry narrowed his eyes. He knew that story, too, and he was not sure what Adalrico meant by referring to it. The McGonagall and Mackenzie families had been at war for generations over the kidnapping and rape of a pair of children that could have belonged to either family depending on whom one listened to, until Calypso McGonagall strode out to the middle of one of their battlefields and sent a binding spell into the air. It tugged Thomas Mackenzie over to her, made him her lawfully wedded husband on the spot, and led to an immediate consummation in the sight of everyone, just so that no one could say later that they weren't really married.

Perhaps he means that they'll be watching to see if I ever choose principle over blood. Long may they watch. It's not going to happen.

"That is true, Mr. Bulstrode," he said, opting for the diplomatic reaction. He nodded to Millicent. "It was nice to meet your father and Pansy's mother, Bulstrode," he said. "I'll see you at school."

"Oh, call me Millicent, Harry," said Millicent, and smiled at him. "I think we should do that now. It's what friends do."

"Are we friends?" Harry raised his brows.

Millicent just smirked at him.

Harry turned around, shaking his head, and nearly slammed into Pansy again. This time, she hastened over to her mother and wrapped her arms around her, giving Harry a suspicious glance.

"It's all right, darling," Hawthorn murmured, stroking her daughter's hair. "Mr. Potter has come up with a way to help me."

Pansy stared at her, and then switched her stare back to Harry. Her face relaxed and warmed considerably in the next moment, and Harry thought that a genuine smile looked better on her than a smirk ever had. "Thank you, Harry," she whispered. "I swear that I'll repay you for this."

Harry just nodded cordially. He wouldn't count anything but the alliance with Mrs. Parkinson as secure, and that only when he delivered the first vial of Wolfsbane Potion. "See you at school, Pansy," he said, and strode away.

It was as he went to meet Sirius that he realized his magic was the quietest it had been since he left the Malfoys'. He blinked and touched his head, but it didn't ache. His thoughts were tame. His emotions were calm.

Is it pureblood traditions that did that? he wondered. Or just the effort of having to think rather than react?

"Harry!"

Sirius grabbed him and swung him around in a hug, and Harry gave up the thoughts for now. He was about to go back to Godric's Hollow and endure a few more days there, which only Connor's presence would make tolerable. With parents who ignored him and a godfather who watched him too closely...

Harry shoved those thoughts aside, and concentrated instead on the new allies he was winning for Connor. That soothed him immeasurably.

Chapter Four: Choosing Their Camlanns

“All right there, Harry?”

Harry nodded jerkily as they passed into King’s Cross Station. Connor smiled at him for a moment longer before looking away as Lily began reciting a long list of instructions to him. James, on the other side of him, looked about, befuddled, for a moment, before apparently deciding that Connor must have been giving himself a reassuring talking-to. After all, as he had told Connor yesterday, who wouldn’t be nervous on going to his third year of school by himself? Sirius would be on the train, but busy arranging team practice schedules with the Quidditch Captains.

Harry closed his eyes and told himself that he had no right to feel hurt or bewildered by this. After all, he was the one who had managed to set things up like this.

“Harry?”

Harry sent a glance sideways to Sirius, who grinned at him and tried to make it look non-nervous. He didn’t succeed. Harry had never seen Sirius so jumpy as he had been in the days since Peter’s visit, even on the occasions when he was planning a major prank and wanted to be sure that no one interfered with it.

“Yes?” he asked, when he saw that Sirius wouldn’t stop staring at him.

Sirius coughed. “I—we’ll talk about why your parents are ignoring you at school, all right?” He quickened his pace and moved towards the front of the line, cuffing Connor on the head as he passed. Connor ducked with a muffled protest, and Lily and James laughed aloud.

Harry closed his eyes. He breathed carefully, and reminded himself over and over, You chose this. You know it was the best course. You would have killed them without it. How could anything but this be the right thing to do?

The web gave a little prompting tug on his mind, as it had been doing since they moved out of the house. It didn’t seem to think that being

near Connor in a wide-open space was the same thing as being across a series of rooms from him. Harry sighed and hurried to catch up.

“Harry.”

Startled, Harry turned his head to the side, and gasped to see Peter standing behind one of the Station’s pillars. He wore Muggle clothing and didn’t look that out of place, at least as long as someone didn’t look into his eyes. They remained piercing, and certainly pierced Harry in place. It was a long moment before he could draw his wand, and a longer moment before he could find his voice.

“Don’t come near me, traitor,” he snarled, leveling his wand in front of him.

“I won’t come nearer than this,” said Peter, keeping his own voice even. “But I thought that you deserved to know more, Harry, as much as I could tell you without the web assaulting and blinding you. Have you ever heard the name Regulus Black?”

“Maybe,” Harry hedged. Sirius had mentioned it once, last year, during his apology to Harry for being an awful godfather. Come to think, he had acted strange during that apology, too. Harry shoved the thought away and concentrated on Peter. He is Wormtail. He only wants to confuse you, to cause treachery. He’s probably working with Fenrir Greyback to return the Dark Lord to life. “I don’t know who he was.”

“Sirius’s brother,” said Peter. “His younger brother. His beloved younger brother, for all that he became a Death Eater.” He paused. “Are you seeing any parallels here, Harry?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Harry said, and was displeased to note that his voice was little more than a breath. He forced more strength into it. “Someone would have told me about Sirius having a younger brother. They always told me that he was an only child. Why conceal it? Mum could have used the story to strengthen my training and show what might happen to Connor if I didn’t guard him.”

Peter closed his eyes. Harry didn't know what to make of the expression that worked over his face then. It looked like a mixture of rage and disgust, but what was there in the words he'd said to inspire that?

"That's true, then," said Peter. "I wondered how much was. I only know what I heard that night. So you're guardian to Connor, then? You really are the sacrifice for him, and weren't just raised to be that way?" He opened his eyes and pinned Harry with his gaze once again.

"Of course," said Harry. His web was quiet, probably because he was doing what it wanted. He plowed ahead. Perhaps he could convince Peter how ridiculous it was to try and speak to him and force him away from his family. Then Peter might run away and become someone else's problem. "I know what I am. I'm proud of it. Why shouldn't I be?"

"Harry," Peter whispered, his voice gone longing. "There is so much wrong with someone simply raised to be a tool for someone else, a pawn, concealing his strength in someone else's shadow."

Harry felt the first headache begin, but he fought through it. "I like it. I don't care." His rage stirred in him, joining the web, but he ignored that, too. "I know that I had some things happen to me that made me not care for that duty for a while, but I have to return. Who else is going to do it?"

"Your parents," said Peter. "Connor. Dumbledore himself. Anyone but you."

"Why?"

"Because," said Peter, "they made your choices for you, and you were too young—"

Harry gasped as the pain hit him like a Bludger to the side of the head. He managed to sit down before he fell down, but it was a near thing. He cradled his forehead in his hands, and whispered the words

that he dimly remembered his mother using to soothe the pain. "I am sacrifice for Connor. This was freely chosen."

The pain eased after a moment. He looked up to see Peter standing away from the pillar, one hand reaching for him. He dropped it when he saw Harry's glare.

"I feared so," he said soberly. "I shattered my web all in one go. Yours was weakened, but it's getting stronger again. I want to help you break it, Harry—"

And then he cut off, but not because of Harry's pain this time. Harry saw him shiver, saw his face turn gray. A shadow fell on him, and Peter scrambled backward, suddenly the cringing little rat Harry thought he always should have been.

Harry looked up.

In front of him floated a black creature with wispy dark robes, its oval head cocked to one side. A hand with fingers like twigs reached for him, and Harry felt his mind tremble, his thoughts dancing and swirling up and out of him.

He was in the Chamber again. It was freezing, and he knelt before the pure, icy-cold force of the magic. It showed him memories that he could not face, things that he knew could not be true...

Harry slammed his hands down beside him, trying to use the pain of the stone cutting into his palms to force himself to focus. He felt his mind waver and turn, and some of the new certainty that he had, that he really was destined to be Connor's guardian and that was the way things were, cracked and broke apart. Once again, he found the terrible uncertainty, the rage at his parents and Dumbledore.

Someone got between him and the creature Harry knew must be a Dementor, and its terrible regard somewhat lessened. Harry blinked and gasped and looked up to find Peter there, his face white as he absorbed the full force of the cold gaze. One hand reached out and hovered above his shoulder, and Peter made a little crumpled sound

and half-collapsed. He never moved from between the Dementor and Harry, however.

Harry began to move forward in a crawl. He wasn't sure what would happen when he got there, but he knew he was going to do something.

Then a voice spoke, like a cold spike piercing Harry's brain. Get away. Back.

Harry cried out, but his voice was a weak and reedy thing in the face of his pain. The Dementor in front of Peter floated weirdly, appearing to turn the top half of its body towards the speaker while keeping its bottom half in front of him. Harry knew it made some response, but this time it was unintelligible to him.

The other speaker, another Dementor who looked more gray than black, drifted up behind the other and said only one word, for which Harry was grateful, since even that word made his head vibrate and seem to freeze.

Vates.

The Dementor holding Peter turned and darted off at once, seeming to hide behind the gray one. The gray one turned its gaze to Harry. He looked up, and forced himself to meet those hidden eyes by a tremendous effort of will.

The gray Dementor reached out and moved one hand in front of him, fingers flicking in a beckoning gesture. Harry felt his rage surge. Then he was half-blinded by a golden glow that seemed to originate from his face. When he could see again, pieces of a golden web were vanishing into the Dementor's fingers. Harry shivered. Why is it freeing me? Why would it? And do I want to be what I will be when the web is entirely gone?

Pain flared in his head, which Harry guessed was the last remnants of the web fighting for life, at the same moment as someone behind him bellowed, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A silvery wolf charged into the two Dementors, making the black one cry out in a high, shrill voice and turn to flee. The gray one lingered for a moment, and Harry knew it was looking at him. He whimpered as the voice spoke again, hammering into one ear and then out the other.

We shall meet again. Vates.

Then they both turned and fled as the silvery wolf came back for another gallop. The wolf slowed to a trot when it saw that it had no more enemies left to face, wagged its tail once, and winked at Harry. Then it tattered into mist and flowed back towards Sirius, who ran over to hug Harry.

“Harry,” he whispered. “Are you all right? I’m so sorry. The Dementors are here, hunting for Peter, and I couldn’t tell—I didn’t know—“

Harry rolled his head slowly to the side. Peter was gone. Harry had expected him to be. He would hardly stay around when first the guardians of Azkaban and then Sirius came for him.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Sirius repeated, drawing back and looking at him again.

Harry looked away from him and took huge, deep, gulping breaths. Part of his control was gone again, the control he had fought so hard to maintain over the summer. He realized now that it must have been built on the crippled but gradually strengthening remains of the web. The Dementor had destroyed that. Harry did not know whether to scream or be grateful.

Well, right now he did want to scream. Sirius murmuring endearments and reassurances was only another reminder of how he hadn’t done so last year until it was far, far too late. Harry tried to counter that, tried to remember how Sirius had taken him flying at Christmas and given him a gift that had helped save his life down in the Chamber, but his thoughts were veering, crashing into one another, and his magic was rising quickly.

"Let's get through the barrier," Sirius was saying as he pulled him along. "I'm sure some Muggles saw the Patronus. This is work for the Obliviators, that's for sure."

Harry closed his eyes. He had to do something with his magic. He didn't know what, but it had to go somewhere.

What can I do?

The magic offered several suggestions, all of them ways that would result in his parents' and Sirius's body in several thousand small pieces. Harry shook his head. He couldn't do that. He still couldn't kill them. He didn't want to kill them. Harm them, maybe.

The magic seized on that, and Harry felt his lips almost part over a spell that would have inflicted gaping wounds on his parents, a spell he had read about but never had the insanity to try. With an effort, he closed his lips and fought his temper back under control. But the air around him was chill, and Sirius shivered as they stepped through the barrier and onto Platform 9 ¾.

Harry tried and tried to fight his magic, but it wasn't working. It sped through the familiar channels in his body that he had created at Malfoy Manor, and demanded things to rend and split and burn. Harry could hear a scream of fury building down in his guts, and shuddered. He would cry aloud in a moment.

"Harry?"

And Sirius was making it worse, damn him, touching and touching and probing. Harry kept his eyes closed, knowing he couldn't see him right now. If he saw his parents, he was sure he would strike. His walls were already weakening, and his magic prowled back and forth like a tiger that knew it would be able to escape its cage in seconds.

The only person Harry thought he might be willing to curse was Dumbledore. But Dumbledore was at Hogwarts—

Hogwarts.

Harry seized gladly on the idea and fed it to his magic, bending his will abruptly to that one goal. The magic lost its defiance as it flooded into him. Harry felt a dense resistance to what he was trying to do, but that only made him fight the harder, and kept him from striking someone dead.

Then he vanished, and passed briefly through a freezing cold space, and appeared just outside Hogsmeade with the loud crack of a successful Apparition.

Harry dropped to one knee and gasped, then coughed. Ice crystals fell past his lips. He shuddered. That was how close he had come to using his magic on someone else. He traced his hands up and down his arms, noting faint webs of white and the first traces of frostbite in his fingers. They were quickly warming under the morning sun, but it had been very, very close.

Well, now that he was here, what was he going to do?

Harry raised his eyes to the road that wound through Hogsmeade, towards the castle, and smiled. He suspected it was a grim smile, but he did not particularly care. Apparating this far had somewhat used, and thus calmed, his magic, but it had done nothing about his rage.

What I came here to do.

SS
SS
SS
SSSSSSSSSS

“Mr. Potter. What are you doing here?”

Just last year, that voice would have made him tense up. Now Harry could smile and turn around, confident that its owner meant to welcome him, no matter what he sounded like. “Professor Snape. Hello, sir.”

Snape stalked towards him, eyes narrowed and nose pointing forward as if to lead the way. The sight eased Harry’s rage. He

leaned against the wall of the entrance hall and waited as Snape halted in front of him and examined him up and down with one disdainful sweep of his eyes.

"You seem to have lost your parents along the way," Snape sniffed at him. "And a brother. And a certain Black mutt."

"Oh, they'll be along, doubtless." Harry felt his smile widen. Merlin, was it really possible that he could have missed Snape this much? "But I wanted to come ahead of them. Get a little air, you know. See the castle before a bunch of idiot children—" he imitated Snape's voice—"overrun it." He hesitated, then continued, as sure of Snape's loyalty as he was of anything in the world. "Speak to a certain Headmaster," he added, "about certain decisions that he made regarding me."

Snape's eyes narrowed further. Harry held his breath. Perhaps Snape had turned backwards in his loyalty after all. Harry would have said that couldn't happen, after the way they had spoken in the storm, but he had almost tricked himself into becoming a useless pawn for his brother again, too.

The rage flared. Harry told it to lie down. You'll get your chance soon enough. And Connor is innocent. Innocent.

"Good."

Harry blinked, jolted out of contemplation of himself again as Snape nodded and pointed in the direction of the Headmaster's office. "The Headmaster's password is Cauldron Cakes," he added. "I will not come with you, Mr. Potter. I trust that you can leave the school standing by yourself?"

Harry only smiled at the snide tone. "I am fairly certain of that, yes, sir," he said gravely.

"Then get to it," said Snape, and spun the other way, his robes flowing behind him as he strode across the hall. Harry thought he saw him halt to speak with someone when he reached the stairs down to

the dungeons, but wasn't sure who it was. Someone from Slytherin come early, perhaps?

I must remember to speak with Snape about brewing the Wolfsbane for Mrs. Parkinson, Harry thought, as he took the stairs to the Headmaster's office. It would be a poor return for all his kindness if I simply took his supplies.

“Cauldron Cakes,” said Harry, and the gargoyle sprang aside. He stepped onto the moving staircase, his shoulders relaxed despite the second storm he could feel brewing inside his head.

He wondered which question he should ask first as the staircase bore him upward. Why did you do it? But he thought it was fairly obvious why Dumbledore had done it: in obedience and answer to the prophecy and the needs of war. Why did you leave the web in my head? But the answer to that question was the same. Did you ever mean for me to find out about this? Well, obviously the answer was no.

He reached the top without deciding. Harry shrugged and pushed open the door to the office proper. He would wait and see what came, then.

Dumbledore was not behind his desk. Harry halted and stared around curiously. He would have thought Snape would warn him if the Headmaster was elsewhere. Perhaps he had gone through a door hidden behind the shelves? Harry moved in to investigate.

A loud trill greeted him before he could move more than a few steps. Harry looked up, and smiled as he saw Fawkes lift from his perch and fly towards him. The phoenix settled on his shoulder, a denser weight than he looked, his head bowed so that his neck brushed against Harry's hair. Harry lifted his hand and stroked those feathers. Fawkes uttered a contented little croon and closed his eyes. Harry briefly wished Dobby were there to translate.

“Harry.”

Harry turned quickly towards the desk again. Dumbledore waited there, his face grave and his eyes darting back and forth between his phoenix and Harry’s hand. Harry wondered if he was more surprised to see Fawkes welcoming Harry or Harry only stroking the bird and not attacking his office.

Fawkes made a loud, disapproving sound and pressed closer to Harry. He did not look up at Dumbledore.

“He has been doing that all summer,” said Dumbledore lightly, apparently deciding that he would play the part of the doting Headmaster. He walked over to sit down behind his desk. “Would you care for a sweet, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. He had gone breathless with rage, abruptly. He took his hand from Fawkes, and the phoenix flew back to his perch. Harry was glad. He thought being in contact with him when his rage began to flare bright and cold might be painful for a creature of fire.

“I want to know why you put this web in my mind,” he said, when he thought he could say that and not simply burst out screaming. “I want to know what the fuck you thought you were doing to me.”

Dumbledore only nodded, as if he had expected this question, and then bent down. Harry tensed, but he retrieved a Pensieve from the floor and set it on the desk. He nodded to it.

“This Pensieve, Harry,” he murmured, “holds the memory of the day that I put the web into your mind. I invite you to enter it and see for yourself. The web can only be enacted on a willing subject, you know. You did choose this fate, though I can see how that might fail to concern you now.” He managed to look stern and forgiving both at once.

Harry snarled, and heard one of the silver instruments on the shelf behind Dumbledore snap. The Headmaster did not flinch, only nodded to the Pensieve again.

Harry strode forward and dipped his head into the silvery liquid.

He found himself on the lawn of the house at Godric's Hollow, on a summer day so bright that there seemed to be no shadows. A younger version of himself lay on his back in the sunlight, reading a book. Harry blinked. He didn't remember the book as being so heavy that his arms had to strain to hold it and tilt it to the light, but obviously it had been.

Dumbledore and Lily stood conversing a short distance away, their voices audible but unimportant to the younger Harry. He was studying to protect his brother, and that was the only thing that mattered. Harry edged closer to the adults, looking back now and then. It seemed odd that he had ever been that small, or his green eyes so serious. Harry had had the impression that he often laughed as a child.

"I think it's time," said Lily. Her voice wavered, but strengthened as she went on. "I've—well, I've monitored him as you asked me to do. And his maturity for a boy his age is just astonishing. He knows that an evil wizard is coming for Connor, and that I want him to do his part to protect his brother."

Dumbledore nodded. "And his magic?"

Lily flinched and glanced away from him. Her eyes seemed to dart back and forth between the lawn and her son. Harry waited, his hands clenched.

"It is frightening," his mother admitted at last, her lips barely moving. "I've never felt anything like it. It sleeps most of the time, and so far he hasn't hurt anyone, but I think that's mostly due to his training. He fetches himself toys when he wants them, and never seems to find it strange that he's not using his hands. He poured himself a bowl of porridge the other day, perfectly, and carried it to the table without spilling a drop—and all the while he didn't look up from his book. He Vanished all the dust in the nursery one day when it was making Connor sneeze. His use of magic is casual, and if it goes on much longer, I don't think he'll be able to stop." She shuddered. "And, Headmaster, it's just—it's hard living in a house with a child like that,

even when his magic is sleeping. It's like listening to a tiger purr. It might be content right now, but you always know that it could attack you, even if it never does."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand, Lily. I think you brave to have endured this as long as you have, a true Gryffindor." Lily lifted her chin. "What about the others? Do they suspect anything?"

Lily smiled sadly. "James could look past a herd of stampeding Acromantulas if it meant not having to acknowledge that one of his sons is Dark." Harry felt bile soak his throat. "And Sirius and Remus don't visit often enough to know what it's like. They're just pleased and proud of Harry's 'accidental magic,' as they call it. They don't know what it's like living day to day with it." She shuddered.

Dumbledore patted her shoulder. "It is all right, my dear," he said. "We both know there was nothing accidental about it, and that such powerful magic in a child is unnatural. He will be happier when he is without it, when he is more like other children." He turned to face the younger Harry reading on the lawn, and drew his wand. "Let us be about this business."

Harry fought the temptation to scoop up his younger self and carry him away. He knew this was only a memory, and he had to watch what happened. He stood there with leaden feet as Dumbledore walked over to the little boy and said, far too casually for Harry's tastes, "What are you reading, my dear boy?"

Younger-Harry blinked at him around the cover of his book. "Defensive spells," he said, as though that should have been obvious. Given that the title of the book was *A Practical Guide to Defensive Magic*, Harry could understand how he'd felt.

Dumbledore nodded. "You want to protect your brother, don't you, Harry? That's the reason that you read about defensive spells and make dust Vanish out of the nursery when he sneezes?"

Younger-Harry flicked a glance to his mother first. Lily nodded at him. Reassured that this man was someone who could know about his

protection of his brother, Harry brought his gaze back to Dumbledore. “Yes, I do,” he said. “I don’t want an evil wizard to come and kill him.”

And I still don’t want that, Harry thought, sick inside as he stared at his own younger face. That is the hell of it. I still want Connor alive. I still love him. Why couldn’t you have just taught me to love him, Mum? Why did you have to make sure that I loved him? Why did you have to bind my magic?

If that was, in truth, what the phoenix web had done. Harry supposed he would find out in a moment.

Dumbledore nodded. “And if I could give you a gift that would make sure you protected your brother all the time, would you take it?” he asked. “It will keep you from wavering or looking aside.”

Harry recognized one of the phrases that Lily had taught him was a bad thing. Younger-Harry did, too. His face lit up, and he nodded. “I never want to waver or look aside,” he said.

“You choose this freely?” Dumbledore had his wand loosely clasped in his hand now, and golden sparks were racing around it. Harry stifled a snarl as he recognized the sparks. They were the exact color of the phoenix web that shone behind his eyes when he did something that it didn’t like.

“Yes!” said Younger-Harry, dropping the book in his eagerness. His eyes shone from behind his glasses. “I want to protect my brother!”

Dumbledore nodded, and then lifted his wand. “Expleo penuriam cum textura!” he said firmly, and the golden sparks went into a wild dance, coalescing around Younger-Harry’s head. “Phoenix texturae!”

The gold tightened into a pattern, and Harry recognized one glimpse of the web as he dimly remembered it from his own wild attempts to repair his mind in the storm. He heard Lily gasp, and Younger-Harry stared at the web in fascination. For a moment, Harry saw the web bisecting his own head, as though his skull were only a shadow, or both the web and Younger-Harry were occupying the same space at the same time.

Then the sight vanished, and Younger-Harry gasped and leaned his head forward. Dumbledore nodded, stood, and carefully backed away from the boy. Harry could feel his own heart, beating in his ears as though someone were clenching a fist around it over and over.

“That will hold,” Dumbledore told Lily. “Placed when he is this young, it will do more than hold. It will reweave his mind to its purpose.” He nodded again. “You need never worry about his magic escaping it again.”

Lily bowed her head in relief, and Harry thought he saw the gleam of tears on her cheeks.

He had seen enough. He pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and made out Dumbledore’s wand aimed at him in the moment before the Headmaster began to intone, “Expleo penuriam—“

Harry lashed out, angrier than he had ever been in his life. He didn’t know what was going to happen. He only knew that he wanted to hurt something, and if that something was the Headmaster, then that was what he would do.

I am barely free, and only because my Locusta died and a Dementor helped me, and he tries to enslave me again? No!

The last word exploded out of his throat as a howl, and the pressure of his magic tore the wand from Dumbledore’s hand and forced him back against the shelves. Harry kept up the steady pressure, even when he felt Dumbledore’s own wandless magic rising to oppose him. He smiled, and it was surprisingly easy to push that magic back down, simply never allowing it out of Dumbledore’s body. Harry knew he would be no match for the Headmaster if once that magic got past his skin, but he could hold it in defensive walls.

“After all,” he whispered aloud, “you taught me to be very, very good at defensive magic.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were still clear, and he still looked at Harry with a mixture of sadness and admonition. “You know the reasons,” he said.

"You know it was necessary. What if you had hurt your brother in a fit of childish temper, Harry? What if you had hurt your parents, or your godfather, or Remus?"

Harry shook his head. "Why didn't my parents simply teach me to control my magic, then, instead of fearing it and locking it away? I surely wouldn't be tossing you around like a toy if it came to that. I would have better control." He was breathing fast. His power was rising out of a well in the center of him, and urging him to do more than simply hold the Headmaster against the wall.

"There is no way of controlling your power save binding it," said Dumbledore. "We could not trust that a four-year-old child would understand the importance of that, and the phoenix web was the one binding that would work with your will to protect Connor and yet be powerful enough to stand a chance against your magic."

"Free me from the last remnants of it," said Harry. "I'm aware now. I understand the importance of control."

"You are still too young." Dumbledore's eyes were diamonds.

Harry nodded. "I thought you would say that," he said, and then concentrated. All his magic leaped from Dumbledore's skin at once. As the Headmaster slumped to the floor, Harry wrapped his magic around himself.

Wards sprang into place, deep and strong, as Harry's will pushed his power forward. He was far more willing to do this than to destroy something, and so the wards attained a strength that his attempts to kill could not have. And all his experience in defensive magic was there, too, the kind that had made Protego so instinctive to him. It wasn't hard at all to tighten the wards and tie them off.

All this took only a second, as did the Headmaster's recovery and the snatching of his wand. "Expleo penuriam cum textura," he said, so fast that Harry was impressed in spite of himself. "Phoenix texturae!"

The spell stormed towards Harry—

And bounced. Dumbledore had to duck as the web slammed past him, into the wall, and dissolved into a crowd of sparks. He stared for a long moment, then brought his gaze slowly back to Harry.

Harry met his eyes without fear. His wards were wrapped around his mind, too, or there would have been no point. Dumbledore could not use Legilimency on him now unless Harry decided to allow him to do so.

“I’m immune to your magic,” he pointed out.

Dumbledore breathed in silence for a moment, eyes never leaving him. Harry stared back. He felt—different. He wasn’t sure yet what all the consequences of the difference would be. Among other things, he didn’t know all the effects of the phoenix web, nor how to remove the lingering pieces of it from his consciousness. But he thought he’d made a good start.

“What do you plan to do?” The Headmaster spoke in a neutral tone. Harry supposed it might be the voice he used to speak to equals or Professors, which Harry of course would never have heard.

“Nothing yet,” said Harry. “I don’t want to fight you, really, Headmaster.” And that was true. Harry still had his horror of controlling and compelling people, and he would still prefer to use defensive magic rather than offensive. “We’re still on the same side. I simply want you to cease trying to control or compel me. I can’t trust that you will yet, so my wards are remaining up.”

“And your brother?” Dumbledore’s voice was a shade cooler.

Harry shrugged. “I love him. You saw to that.” He swallowed his bitterness. There were some things he could not change, and some he could not give up. “I’ll protect him, but not as blindly or as slavishly as before.”

“And your parents?”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t see them right now. I don’t know what I’d do.” He found it refreshing to be honest. His head tingled and his

body rang, and Harry suspected he was in shock. Well, he would land in a short time. He had a whole new road to walk now, and doubtless it would be hard. But at least he would be freer than before.

He half-considered asking Dumbledore about Peter, but decided there would be no point. He would meet with Peter again, if he ever showed himself, and see what could be done.

Dumbledore bowed his head. "This is not the way I hoped things would work out, my boy," he murmured.

"Well, it's the way things have," said Harry, and turned for the door.

He knew his face must look strange. He felt strange. Beneath the shock was not fear or anger or bewilderment as he would have expected, but rising exaltation.

I'm closer to being free. I never knew it would feel this good.

He paused when he reached the gargoyle again. Two figures were waiting for him there, not one as he expected. Beside Snape stood Professor McGonagall, her eyes sharp and haunted.

"Harry," Snape said, his voice at once mocking and triumphant, "I believe that Minerva has something to say to you."

Chapter Five: The Course of True Ethics Never Did Run Smooth

Severus had been picking at her all summer.

Sometimes, Minerva thought she should never have tried to make him comfortable at Hogwarts as a teacher, or at least not in the way she had. When he had first started teaching Potions, she had grown sick of his constant sniping at his colleagues and the sneers about how no one could possibly understand him because none of the other professors had come out of Slytherin House. Or been a Death Eater, for that matter, Minerva sometimes thought, but that was not something that one brought up around Severus.

Finally, she confronted him after he had yet again reduced Rolanda to stammering in incoherent rage, and asked him if he really felt as alone as all that. After listening to a long tirade, mixed with sneers, on the necessary superiority and therefore solitude of Slytherin House, she asked him, “And would it change your mind if I told you that I was almost Sorted into Slytherin?”

He stared at her. In a moment, however, he recovered his sneer. In those days, he was never without it. Minerva wondered sometimes why he thought he fooled her, who had taught him through seven years of school and knew the hurting little boy he had been.

“You are lying,” he had said, his voice softly poisonous and full of contempt. “Lying out of pity, which is a Gryffindor trait if ever there was one.”

“Tell me, Severus,” Minerva had asked him, “do you believe that one’s Animagus form reflects that person’s nature?”

“I know the theory, Minerva.” He managed to sound bored and cutting at the same time, which Minerva had to admit was quite a feat for a man who hadn’t yet seen his twenty-second year.

“Oh, good,” she said. “I am happy for you.” He’d peered at her suspiciously then, because she never used sarcasm around him. Ordinarily, Minerva thought, there was no need. “Then you might

consider what it means that my Animagus form is a cat, Severus, rather than a sheep."

She'd turned and left him gaping after her then, stifling the other things she wanted to say. She could have mentioned that four Gryffindor students who had recently left school were inveterate pranksters whose spirit she had never crushed in the name of keeping to rules. But one did not touch raw and bleeding wounds, and that comment would have torn them open for the both of them. Severus remembered the four boys who had tormented and nearly killed him all too well; Minerva remembered four prize students who were now shattered into three loyalists and one traitor rotting in Azkaban. That had been less than a month after Connor Potter defeated Voldemort, and everyone was feeling around uneasily in this strange new world.

Minerva had been content at first when her revelation proved to serve its purpose, and Severus stopped pretending that he was some martyr no one could ever understand. Of course, then he started coming to her whenever he had some Slytherin issue that he wanted someone else to agree with him about, from a student who failed every class that wasn't Potions to the darkening reputation of his House in the school as a whole. Most of the time, she didn't agree with him, but he didn't care. They would badger and shout and storm and sneer and whisper at each other, and in the end he would leave, seemingly satisfied.

Once, she'd asked him why he didn't go and converse with Filius, who would at least understand and appreciate the finer abstract principles behind the arguments even if he didn't agree with them morally. Why did he want debate out of her?

He'd looked at her strangely and replied, "Because you were almost Slytherin, of course."

And you hold onto House affiliations with a stubbornness that only Sirius Black and James Potter rival, Minerva thought, but even though that was seven years after Voldemort's defeat, she still held her tongue on the matter of the Marauders.

Of course, the last two years had been different, since Connor Potter went into Gryffindor and Harry Potter into Slytherin. Severus stopped coming to talk with her as often, and then at all. He seemed to spend a great deal of his time giving Harry Potter detentions or private lessons. Minerva, preoccupied with trying to guard the Philosopher's Stone and mentor both the Boy-Who-Lived and Hermione Granger that first year, hadn't really noticed, but as second year wore on, she began to wonder.

Then she began to wonder what Severus thought he was doing, and then Albus. She'd spoken with Harry last year, almost on the brink of doing something...well, something Slytherin, was the only way she could think of it.

But Harry had so adamantly refused her help, and insisted that protecting his brother was his free choice, that Minerva had felt compelled to let it lie. Yes, she could intervene when there was no choice, when there were tears and bruises or Dark curses, and a child's life in danger. But she had never encountered a child like Harry, who seemed to have undergone the most horrible things and yet spoke the wartime rhetoric, the rhetoric that Minerva herself had learned to obey, like an adult. She had felt it would be a betrayal to press him, to help him when he did not want her help. And when he had come back and spent so long in the hospital wing at the end of the year, she had winced, but thought he was recovering, and he certainly had not needed her help. Besides, so far as she knew, his suffering was not a result of his conditioning.

Severus had changed all that, him and his endless picking over the summer, his causal mentions of the latest letter he was writing to Harry or which Harry had written to him from the Malfoys', his recitation of deaths caused in the First War by Albus's tactics, his unexpected and very long discourse on the finer details of Peter Pettigrew's trial for betrayal of the Potters (Minerva still wondered where he'd learned all that). Severus had hinted, and hinted, and picked, and picked, and given her a casual look whenever she questioned why he was doing this.

The upshot of it was that she agreed to meet Harry on the day he came back to school and ask him exactly how she could help him.

Of course, she also had a few questions of her own, ones that Severus did not know she intended to ask. He didn't have much of a chance to guess at them, either.

That is because he's not a Gryffindor, Minerva told herself, and waited patiently at the bottom of the stairs to the Headmaster's office, until the gargoyle moved and Harry emerged from behind it.

Minerva studied Harry carefully. She could feel his power, of course, in the way that witches and wizards of the McGonagall family had long been taught to feel it—as a wind that blew across the surface of her skin in long, cold, steady exhalations. She knew from that that Harry was very strong, the strongest wizard in the school if one excepted Albus, but she had already expected that. She was more interested in the look in his eyes and the expression on his face.

Harry's green eyes shone with a deep clarity that Minerva would not have expected from any child under sixteen, which had been the youngest age that Albus would permit students to be when they fought Voldemort in the First War. He looked as if he knew his choices and knew how to make them. It was the look of a man who had seen down the long road of consequences to the end, and determined to walk it anyway. It was the look Minerva had seen in Frank Longbottom's eyes, in James Potter's before his sudden and unexplained abandonment of the Auror position, in her own when she heard about the deaths of the Prewett brothers.

It impressed her, and it frightened her deeply. That a child could look like this, in these days when no open War raged and Voldemort had not managed to return...

And it finally, in a way that all Severus's nagging little hints hadn't managed, pushed her into a clear, cold anger.

"Mr. Potter," she said, when she had studied him for long enough that a few of her questions were answered, "I wanted to apologize. I should have pressed harder last year, when I first learned that you were a sacrifice for your brother, or intended to be one."

Harry simply tilted his head and studied her out of one eye, letting his hair fall across the other. He did that quite often, Minerva realized abruptly, remembering the times he had done it in Transfigurations class last year. He was waiting for something else, some acknowledgement that she hadn't given him yet.

"You would not have accepted my help then, I know," she continued, and at least this was familiar, this admitting of mistakes. She had made more than her share of them over the years. She usually admitted them to Albus, though, especially after she had second-guessed his tactics. "But still, there were things I could have done, as your professor, to insure that you did not have to return to your parents for any holidays, even the Easter ones."

"I could have chosen to stay here, too, Professor," said Harry, his voice soft. "I didn't. I wanted to be with my family just then." He lifted his head and shook his hair, and for a moment Minerva could make out both eyes and that lightning bolt scar that Severus had made several preposterous claims about. "And that's changed, but not a lot. I'm still a minor, after all. They still have legal control of me. And my brother," he added. "I could hardly run away and leave Connor there alone."

Minerva said, primarily because it was true and only secondarily because it would irritate Severus, "You would have made a fine Gryffindor, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled at her. Severus spluttered. Minerva ignored him. Harry was more important than scoring House points, in the end. Any student who had suffered so would have been, but Harry was, in this case, the student who had suffered so, and it would take much to pry her from his side now. But she couldn't afford to let that through her stern mask yet.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "what do you intend to do, now that you know the truth and have recovered a good portion of your power?" His magic was near a gale now, though she felt the cold wind only on her skin and not her hair or her body. It still made the hairs on her arms stand up.

“Do?” Harry echoed as if he hadn’t really thought about it, and blinked. Minerva nodded slightly. She had been right to ask, and never mind that Severus was trying to get some word in edgewise. This was important. She could hardly condone some of the actions that Harry might reasonably want to undertake right now.

“Do you plan to take revenge?” she asked him quietly. “I would not blame you if you wanted it. But if you tried to kill or maim someone else, then I would stop you. I promise you that.”

“Minerva!” Severus hissed. “What the child has gone through—“

“The child is standing right here, Professor Snape,” said Harry, with more than a trace of irritation in his voice. “And she’s right. I want revenge, but how can I expect the Head of Gryffindor House to let me hold down and torture my father, or cheer me on as I kill my mother?”

Minerva peered hard into his eyes. The words were lightly spoken, and the burning clarity in his face had gone shuttered again. She was not sure if he meant what he said or not.

Either way, some truths must come clear now.

“Indeed,” she agreed calmly. “Of course, you could not expect me to stand behind you if you were intent on killing and enslaving people who had never done you wrong, as You-Know-Who did, or on controlling and compelling others, as—as Albus has done.” It was still strange to speak of him that way, the Headmaster who had saved so many lives during the First War. But he had done this, too, and if Minerva could not change the whole base of her ethics in a day or a season, she could at least acknowledge that leaders were not perfect. And this was far enough from perfection to sway her loyalties in the matter of Harry.

“I will never do either of those things.”

Minerva’s heart soared as she watched Harry’s face when he made that vow. He spat the words, his lip curling at the thought of either murder or slavery. She had hoped that he would say such things, and had even thought there was a good chance, since, after all, he had

been a slave himself and would not like the idea. But Voldemort had been mistreated as a child and yet had not learned empathy, and Albus had loved the whole wizarding world enough to destroy the Dark Lord Grindelwald and yet had not loved a single child enough to spare him becoming a sacrifice. Contradictions existed in the world, and powerful wizards tended to embody them more than most.

More than that, Minerva thought, they impact on the world more than we do. So many people might yet feel the weight of Harry Potter's contradictions, did he have the best intentions in the world.

"Has Professor Snape told you what my highest ambition is, Professor McGonagall?" Harry went on, his head high and his gaze directly focused on her.

Minerva shook her head. Severus had nattered on about a great many things, including how Harry could help unite the wizarding world in his unique position as the son of a Muggleborn witch who knew a great many pureblood traditions, and what he might do for the reputation of Slytherin House, and even how he could usher in a whole new era for the wizarding world. Minerva had no doubt that those were Severus's major ambitions for the boy. He wanted to help Harry, she had no doubt of that, but he was already looking to what would happen when the boy had mastered his rage and his magic and was free to use both as he wished. Minerva was more interested in the immediate consequences of his actions.

"I want to be free," said Harry, and his face glowed and his voice rang with passion. "I want to know what it's like to wake up in the morning and have something on my mind other than duty. I want to help other people find freedom, too, and maybe even help balance their freedoms." He shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed now. "And I also want to help protect my brother and insure that he survives his victory over Voldemort. But I don't think those two things need to contradict each other, so they're both my highest ambitions."

"You should be thinking more of your own life," Severus stepped in then to chide him.

"I am," Harry snapped back at him, and Minerva caught and hid a chuckle as she saw the spirit flare in his eyes. This would be one of the reasons that Severus was so drawn to the child, she thought. Severus might convince himself that he would be best pleased if every student obeyed him without thought and without question, but in truth, he would be bored stiff. He needed a challenge, someone whom he could mentor and who would mentor him back, and it looked as if Harry would be that person. "I want to be free. That's thinking of my own life."

"And what about breaking free of your convictions of duty?" Severus asked in a drawl gone silky. Minerva was fairly certain she could have stepped away then, and neither would have noticed. Harry was glaring at Severus. Severus was looking back at him if he were a Potions ingredient that unaccountably refused to be diced up. "You know that you want to be free of them. How can you be free if you still want to protect your brother?"

"Strange as it may seem," said Harry, his back and voice both gone stiff with indignation, "someone can want to be free, and can even be cunning and Slytherin, without being an utter bastard."

Severus's eyes narrowed, and he was almost surely preparing to say something unfortunate. Minerva shook her head. "Harry," she said, and the boy's eyes snapped back to her. "You have reassured me greatly. Please, come to me if you are ever unsure about what you want to do next, or if you wish to know some methods for controlling your magic, or if you simply want to talk."

Harry blinked at her. "You could show me ways to control my magic?" he asked.

Minerva smiled, and felt a knot of tension that had been gathering itself in her spine at the thought of what she must do next relax. "Yes, of course. Calypso McGonagall was my ancestor, one of the most powerful witches who ever lived. She had to control her magic, or she would have destroyed Scotland several times over. And she had to come up with ways to do it on her own, as no one like her had existed in the bloodline until that point. Her methods have come down to me as part of my family history." She inclined her head slightly to Harry.

"In Merlin's name, not all pureblooded witches and wizards are in Slytherin."

The boy looked as if someone had slapped him in the face with a haddock. He blinked several more times, then nodded. "Thank you, Professor McGonagall," he said. "I'll remember that."

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "You have made it easier to be on your side." She stepped past him and towards the staircase. She could feel both Harry's and Severus's eyes on her back. She ignored them both. There were some things that she had to do alone, and some ways in which she was not a Slytherin. Albus deserved to know that she would stand to oppose him from now on, or at least until she discovered some reason that she should not.

"Be careful, Minerva," said Severus.

"If I don't come back, Severus," she said, without glancing back at him, "take care of my Gryffindors."

She could feel him making a horrible face. She ignored that, too, and rode the staircase upwards, thinking of a battle that Harry would only have read about and Severus had not fought in—the battle that had secured her loyalty to Albus Dumbledore.

"Back! Back!"

When Frank Longbottom sounded the call for a retreat, the battle had turned for the worse. Minerva maintained her position for a moment longer nevertheless, sending curses at the Death Eaters in front of her without a pause for breath. One of them returned her spell for spell, and the other was holding a weakening Shield Charm. Minerva broke that one's protection with a spell she had developed herself, and had the satisfaction of seeing that wizard fall, screaming, before she followed the others.

Around them, the gray skies and green grass of Ireland glowed ferociously, as if to make up for the burned patches where curses had struck and the blood shed by fallen bodies. It had been a vicious battle, Minerva saw. Over twenty Death Eaters were dead, and nearly

as many on their own side. As she fled, she wondered why Frank had sounded the retreat at all.

Then she glanced over her shoulder, and saw Voldemort coming.

There was no mistaking the Dark Lord's arrival. His darkness spread out from him, visible, lifting wings. Those wings were part of a spell that he'd created, and which the Order had no way of countering, but which they called the Black Plague in honor of those it left dead. Minerva held her breath and ran madly for the Portkey point. Anti-Apparition wards were already in place around the battlefield, maintained by both sides. Neither wanted their foes to simply flee.

The ground shook as Minerva gained the safety of a small copse of yew trees, and she grimaced. There were giants coming. You-Know-Who had made a treaty with them that no one could figure out the terms of; the giants were allowed to ravage as much as they wanted, but also obeyed Voldemort's battle instructions. If they showed up, the battle would turn, swiftly, very bad.

"Minerva!"

She turned at Alice's call. Together, they touched the small silver ring that would bring them to the safety of Hogwarts.

It didn't work.

Minerva swallowed heavily. She had not sensed any spell blocking the operation of Portkeys on the battlefield, though of course there could be one. She reached out, and felt nothing behind the anti-Apparition wards. She shook her head.

"He's found some way of making the spells undetectable," she said, and Alice nodded.

Then she coughed.

Minerva quickly cast the Bubble-Head Charm on both of them. It would not hold for long against the Plague, but it might matter. She

turned and saw other bubbles of clear air sprouting around the Order members.

Except for one. Young Cassiopeia Marchbanks was on her knees, already hacking. Minerva felt Alice stir as if to go to her, but Minerva grabbed her arm. If Alice touched her, there would be nothing anyone could do to halt the Plague's spread into her, too.

They had to watch as Cassie writhed, her body wriggling and straining like a sack full of kittens about to be drowned, and then burst. From her skin, black polyps burst, and a thick black liquid ran out, staining the ground. Dark spores launched into the sky, seeking for victims. Minerva eyed them, and decided the Bubble-Head Charms would keep them safe for now, at least until the spores found another victim. The second-stage Plague could not be stopped by the Charm.

A high, cold laugh announced that Voldemort had arrived. Minerva turned, holding on to her temper and her pride. She would die as a McGonagall died, as a Gryffindor died.

The Dark Lord was a point of red light at the center of a whirling cloud of darkness, his Black Plague and the power that boiled off him so thickly it was actually visible. His eyes were red, his wand glowed red with the curse he was preparing, and his hands were red, too, Minerva thought, or should be, given the amount of blood he had spilled.

We are going to die, Minerva realized. This was the first time she had seen Voldemort so close since the War began, and she knew, now, that there was utterly no trace of anything human left in him. She raised her wand.

Voldemort had opened his mouth to speak the first words of the curse when a piercingly sweet song rang out over the battlefield. The Dark Lord turned his head, eyes narrowing.

The phoenix that came down and almost took out his eyes—he ducked at the last moment, cursing—was one Minerva knew. She

began to breathe more easily, her eyes following Fawkes as he rose and circled, cutting a swath of light through the storm of the Plague, his song heartening the warriors of the Light. Could he really be here?

But he had been miles away, on a battlefield in England—

And then he was there, after all, Albus Dumbledore, striding along under his phoenix. He glowed white, from his beard to his robes to the air around him. This was his own power, Minerva knew, the power of the Light, which she had never seen manifest like this. It was like warm wind across her skin, which built up to broiling desert wind as he stopped, facing Voldemort.

“You have come out of your school to die before me then, Albus?” Voldemort asked, his voice high.

“I have come to fight you, Tom,” said Albus, his voice calm and mild.

And then they began to fight.

Minerva could remember surprisingly little of the battle, for all that she had been as close as anyone. She remembered stormclouds of Light and Dark, writhing white fire that withered the Black Plague cloud, a red curse that turned Leda Swanswallow inside out, and through it all a high, steady phoenix song. But there was little more than that, until the moment when the Portkeys abruptly activated again and snatched them away from the battle to land safely in Hogwarts.

Albus remained. If he had tried to leave, Voldemort would have followed at once, and probably managed to inflict damage on a good many other people. Instead, he stayed, his anger at Albus up, and then turned tail and ran when his fear overcame his rage.

Albus saved twenty-six lives that day, twenty-seven if one included the child that Alice Longbottom had not yet known she carried. And he did it again and again, fearlessly, coming incredibly close to sacrificing his own life each time, knowing the lure of killing the Light’s strongest hope would bring the Death Eaters, and Voldemort himself, to the battle.

Minerva had never forgotten it. Albus asked much of his troops, but he never asked more than he was willing to give himself. He had made decisions that no one else could have—he had been the first one to realize that the Black Plague could not be cured, either, and that bringing victims of the second-stage spores along merely insured that others got sick and died in violence and shrieking pain—and he had stuck by them. Her loyalty was his.

Until now, Minerva thought, as she stepped off the moving staircase and into Albus's office. Old friend, why must you have stumbled at last, asked for one particular sacrifice that you had no right to ask? She found Albus sitting behind his desk, staring at nothing. When she came in, he looked up. He did not even seem surprised, his eyes sorrowful and intent. He knows what I have come about, Minerva thought, and knew it was true.

"Albus," she said. She had planned an elaborate speech, but found it wasn't necessary. She merely leaned forward and placed her hands flat on his desk. She needed just one word, other than his name. "Why?"

Albus sighed tiredly and looked at the perch on the other side of the room. Fawkes was gone, Minerva saw. Her heart gave a slow, steady thump, heavy as the fall of a coffin lid. It felt as though the world had just confirmed what she already suspected. She stepped slowly away from him.

"I made one sacrificial decision too many," said Albus softly. He sounded as if he were talking to himself, not her, as if he had forgotten she was even in the room. "I wanted so badly to spare one I loved from the perils of having to make a harsh choice. I found someone who was willing to agree, to make that choice instead. And it cost him. Oh, it cost him. But the cost was willingly paid." He let out a shuddering breath. Minerva thought she had never seen Albus look so old, not even when the news of the Children's Massacre came from Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Death Eaters had crucified dozens of Muggleborn children and left them to die.

"And past that point," Albus went on, his voice a murmur now, "there were other decisions to make, things that might have hurt someone else unless they were stopped and checked. When one bitter, bitter sacrifice is made, what is another? There were those who said I should have murdered Tom Riddle when he was a babe in the cradle, should have killed him when he was a student, should have smothered his magic when first it showed itself in its power. And I hesitated. I remembered my own long struggles to master my magic, and wondered if someone else would have looked at me, declared me a danger to the wizarding world, and killed me. For the good of wizarding kind, of course."

He closed his eyes. Minerva waited, listening.

"I let him grow," Albus whispered. "And that was a mistake. When I found a child who seemed to be part of his legacy, whose magic was deeply unnatural in more ways than one, what was I to do?

"Not kill him, of course. But bind him? Yes, that was an option. And what better way to bind him than to ask him if he wanted to be a sacrifice, and to accept his answer?" Albus closed his eyes again.

"You should have known," said Minerva, "that he was too young to make that decision." She kept her voice iron. His words affected her, of course they did, but she was a Gryffindor. It took more than pretty words to sway her.

"He made it," said Albus, and looked up at her with a face as weary as time. "And it must be kept as made, Minerva, or have consequences that you cannot conceive of."

"Do you really believe that Harry Potter will become a Dark Lord?" Minerva folded her arms and stared at him.

Albus shook his head. "It is not even that," he said. "It is worse. It is the opposite." He smiled, but it was a horrible rictus of a grin, and Minerva was not sure what he found funny. He stood and looked at her evenly. "I must put him under the phoenix web again. It can be renewed. Once the choice is made, it is not so easily taken back."

"I stand to oppose you, Albus," said Minerva.

"You are following your heart, Minerva?" Those blue eyes looked deeply into her. "And not the call of power? You are sure?"

"If it were the call of power," said Minerva, "I would still be yours." She found her breath coming short. There were so many old loyalties falling to pieces here, so many things changing.

"True enough," said Albus, and looked away, releasing her from the grip of his eyes. "To both sides of this struggle, then, Minerva. I would rather have you for an opponent than anyone else in the world."

Minerva crossed the office to the door. She hesitated for a long moment, until Albus looked up at her.

Then she swept her palm in front of her as she bowed her head, the old pureblooded salute of a challenge given and accepted, and departed.

Chapter Six: A Day and a Night

“But you weren’t there.”

Harry checked a sigh as he and Draco slid into their desks in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, followed by the rest of the third-year Slytherins and a good number of third-year Ravenclaws. The Ravenclaws tended to glare threateningly at Harry, no doubt thinking about the time last year when they believed him to be an evil Dark Lord. Harry ignored them for the most part. Draco was far more annoying.

“Yes, and I told you why,” he said, hearing the edge to his own voice. “I had to get out of there. I would have killed someone otherwise.”

One of the Ravenclaws gasped. Harry would have glared at her, but Draco leaned around and did it for him. The girl squeaked and concentrated on her book instead.

“You could have come to the Manor,” said Draco fiercely, lowering his voice. “That’s one of the reasons I gave you that Portkey.”

“Yes, and appeared alone in the house with your parents,” said Harry. “That would have gone over wonderfully well.”

“Mother would have Apparated you to Hogwarts,” said Draco, who seemed determined to find an answer for every argument Harry could possibly offer, as long as it meant not having to admit that Harry had a legitimate reason for not riding the Express. “She would have firecalled me when I arrived and told me where you were. I wouldn’t have to spend seven hours fretting and wondering and waiting.”

“Well, you did,” said Harry, pulling his inkwell from his bag, “and then you saw me at the Slytherin table. That is the end of the story, Draco.”

Draco shook his head. “Someday, Harry,” he said loftily, “you’re going to have to learn that other people have a right to be interested in your movements.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue back, and then Remus swept into the room. He was moving well for a werewolf who'd been subjected to the full moon yesterday, Harry thought—which meant his face was pale, but not the color of parchment, and his hands trembled when he laid the book he carried down on his desk, but not noticeably. He turned about and smiled at the students.

“Third-year Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to this class. My name is Remus Lupin. You may call me Professor Lupin.” He paused as one of the Ravenclaws’ hands went up. “Yes—your name?”

“Elise Swanswallow,” said the girl, and leaned forward intently. “I’ve heard Connor Potter talk about you. Aren’t you his godfather?”

Remus smiled pleasantly. “Yes, I am.”

“But isn’t that going to cause a conflict of interest?” Elise tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. Harry decided that he didn’t like her, and this time it wasn’t the web’s fault, for making him dislike everyone who spoke ill of his brother. Her eyes were too wide and innocent, and she looked as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. “After all, you’ll be tempted to give him better marks just because he’s your godson.”

The smile slid away from Remus’s face. “Miss Swanswallow,” he said, “I would ask you to give me the benefit of the doubt until such time as that actually happens.”

As always with Remus’s mild rebukes, Harry thought, it took a moment for the sting to set in. Elise flushed then, and lowered her eyes to the desktop. “Sorry, Professor,” she said meekly.

“Quite all right,” said Remus heartily, as he picked up the list of students. “I’m used to being questioned. Now, let me make sure that everyone’s here who should be. Millicent Bulstrode?”

As they strolled through the list of names, Draco muttered to Harry, “Should he be teaching when he looks like that?”

"It's just full moon," Harry muttered back. "He'll be fine. And most people don't know anything about his condition, so I'll thank you not to discuss it." Draco pulled back with a flinch, and Harry sighed to himself. He'd probably been more annoyed than he should be, because Draco would not stop picking at him. He was fine. Why should it matter?

"...Turtledove," Remus finished, and nodded as the last Ravenclaw girl murmured in response. "Good." He laid the parchment down on his desk and leaned forward. "I understand that your last Defense Against the Dark Arts professor did not spend much time on the distinction between Light and Dark magic."

"He did his best," said Pansy, a little stiffly. Harry rolled his eyes. He was coming to accept that Pansy was a great deal more sensible than he had thought she was, but she still had a crush on Lockhart that meant she tried to defend him at every opportunity. She had actually been disappointed when she found out the golden git wasn't coming back to Hogwarts.

"I'm sure he did," said Remus, with a smile that soothed Pansy immediately. Harry hid a smile of his own. Remus tended to be soothing. Just being in his presence made Harry let go of a lot of the tension he'd developed during the summer. "But since I can't find anything in his notes that indicates he explained things like this to you, I'll explain anyway."

He waved his wand, and a gasp rose from the class as motes of light spun out from it and into two distinct shapes. Harry leaned back in his chair. Remus had always been good at illusions, and it was fun to watch him dazzle the rest of the class.

"Here," Remus said, pointing to the illusion on the left, of a girl with nondescript brown hair and eyes, "is someone we'll say is under a Light spell." He nodded to the figure on the right, the same girl. "And this is the same person under a Dark spell."

He waved his wand again. The girl on the left continued smiling, but the one on the right grimaced horribly, as though she were fighting

something. Harry swallowed and had to look away. Sometimes Remus was too good at illusion magic.

"That is the primary difference between Dark and Light magic," said Remus softly. "Not that one is pleasant and the other unpleasant. Most medical magic is pretty unpleasant." He was making a horrible face, Harry saw when he looked back. A majority of the students giggled—even Pansy, who looked surprised at herself. "Not even that one affects the body and the other the mind. There are plenty of spells classed as Light and spells classed as Dark that do both. If we eliminated all the spells that did anyone harm, then we'd have to quit teaching most of Charms and at least half of Transfigurations. And of course we'd have to eliminate all the poisonous plants from Herbology, and the poisonous Potions ingredients."

"No, the main difference between Light and Dark magic is the difference between compulsion and choice."

Harry froze. He'd never heard it explained like that before.

"Light magic is either done with the subject's consent," Remus continued blithely, sending his illusions back into spinning motes of light, "or it does not need consent—when you Transfigure a table into a chair, for instance—or it is done for the cause of letting someone continue to give consent, as when you try to preserve someone else's life. Even there, intent matters, the choice of the original caster. A Light spell could become Dark if someone performed it against his or her will. Likewise, a Light spell performed to maintain life when the person who cast it only wanted his target to stay alive so he could suffer torture would be Dark." Remus ran his eyes across the class. "Remember that, all of you. Light magic takes account of your will, but also of other people's wills."

Harry blinked, and blinked again. He'd never encountered a theory so unified and yet so simple. Most of his reading on the subject was on Ministry laws that forbade the use of certain spells, and why. Most of the books had argued strenuously that the restrictions should be loosened. Harry, thinking of ways in which he could use the spells to defend Connor, had agreed.

But what if someone else didn't agree to them? What if he cast a spell and it was not what someone else wanted, but that person wasn't Connor?

Rationally, Harry knew he'd learned nothing dazzlingly new, but it had still hit him hard. He barely listened as Remus went into the next part of the lecture.

"Dark spells, on the other hand, thrive on compulsion," Remus went on, his voice growing grim. "Dark creatures are those who usually subdue the victim's will so he can't escape. That's why Dementors are considered Dark creatures and dragons are not. Dragons are dangerous, but they can't hold you in place, suck our your memories, and corrupt your mind the way that Dementors can."

Draco put up a hand. Remus nodded to him. Draco put his hand down and gave an innocent smile. "Are werewolves Dark creatures, too?" he asked.

Remus jerked, but it was a movement so tiny that Harry didn't think anyone would see it who wasn't looking for it. Draco smirked, then yelped as Pansy abruptly pinched the back of his neck.

"Shut up," Pansy whispered. Her voice was so deadly that Draco paled. Harry turned to listen to Remus's answer. Remus's eyes were narrowed speculatively at Pansy, but he smiled quickly.

"Yes, werewolves are Dark creatures," he said lightly. "But it's not because they kill people. Dragons can do that, too, after all. It's because the bite is a curse, a sickness that's spread without consent, and the werewolf himself usually loses his or her mind to the ravening beast on the nights of the full moon."

The Ravenclaws were scribbling away, Harry saw, and even some of the Slytherin quills were moving. He supposed he should do the same thing, though he was so far into shock that he was having trouble thinking.

So Dumbledore was right, he thought, as he finally began to take notes on the special varieties of Dark magic. The phoenix web is

technically Light magic, since it was given with my consent. But something like the Imperius Curse is still Dark magic, perhaps the purest form of Dark magic, since it subdues its victim's will.

And that means that the Memory Charm is Dark magic, too, or should be. And since I know what Dumbledore was trying to hide by casting Obliviate on Remus, and I don't agree with it any more...

I have to free him.

Harry looked up as Remus cast another illusion, this one a ramified tree explaining the varieties of Light and Dark magic. His face was content, and he seemed more energized than Harry had ever seen him this close to the full moon.

I'll have to tread carefully. Snape said a carelessly snapped Memory Charm could cost the victim his sanity. But I'll do it. I have to. I owe it to him. He would have fought for me, and he had his will taken over without his consent.

Bastard, Harry finished, and wondered if he meant Dumbledore or himself.

Harry paused as he entered McGonagall's classroom, and frowned. Connor sat near the front, talking with Ron and Hermione. But Slytherins never had Transfiguration class with Gryffindors.

Draco pressed in behind him, looked over his shoulder, and said, "What?"

Harry shook his head and went slowly to the side of the room where they usually sat, still looking at Connor over his shoulder. His twin had noticed him now, and was blinking much as he was. Harry studied his face, but saw no sign that he'd known about this.

Pansy started complaining the moment she saw the Gryffindors. Parvati Patil fired insults back, and things would have descended to hexes very soon if McGonagall hadn't swept in just then and eyed them all sternly.

Hermione's hand was immediately in the air. "Professor McGonagall," she said. "Why do we have class with the Slytherins?"

"I wanted it that way, so I rearranged the timetable, Miss Granger," said McGonagall, looking the picture of offended pride. If Harry hadn't seen that she could smile yesterday, he would never have believed it. "Besides, one might as well say the Slytherins have class with you."

Hermione dropped her hand and gaped at her teacher. Harry calmly took out his book. He thought he saw what was going through McGonagall's mind now. She wasn't going to strive to separate Slytherins and Gryffindors any more, assuming she ever had (and since she taught no mixed Slytherin-Gryffindor classes except for the sixth and seventh years, he thought she had). Besides, changing things at all would send a message to Dumbledore.

Harry found he rather admired her.

"Today," McGonagall announced, adjusting her hat on her head as she spun across the front of the room, "we will begin a lecture on Animagi. I want you to know the theory behind it, though of course no one will attempt a practical demonstration." Icicles were in her voice. "I will also want you to write essays in pairs, and one group of three, so that you may pool your knowledge. I will assign the pairs and the topics. Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger. Blaise Zabini, Parvati Patil. Harry Potter, Connor Potter."

Harry nodded as he gathered up his books and went to Connor's side of the room. He was sure that Draco would sit where he was and make Hermione come to him. That meant he could at least be away from Draco's whining that they weren't paired together.

"Harry." Connor's voice was welcoming, if cool. He pulled his bag off the nearest chair so Harry could sit down. "Do you know why she has us working together?"

"To make a point," said Harry, and elaborated when he saw his brother's blank look. "For inter-House unity, I think."

"Oh." Connor looked thoughtful. As they waited for McGonagall to assign them a topic, he whispered, "Did I tell you that found a teacher for my compulsion gift?"

Harry hid a sigh. He had hoped the compulsion gift really would disappear over the summer, that it had come from the presence of Tom Riddle in Connor's head and wasn't his at all. It made him slightly ill to think about his twin possessing such magic. But he made his voice enthusiastic. "That's wonderful, Connor. Who is it? The Headmaster?"

Connor shook his head. "Sirius."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"Yes," Connor went on, oblivious to Harry's wide-eyed shock. "He—
They had to wait while McGonagall came to them and assigned them their topic: why Animagi had to register with the Ministry. Connor wrote it down painstakingly, with a dedication that Harry didn't remember him showing last year. When he was finished, he continued as if they hadn't been interrupted. "He has the gift himself. He doesn't use it carelessly, of course," he added quickly. "But his parents trained him in it, and I don't think you could ask for stricter teachers than the Blacks as far as Dark magic goes. I mean, look at Bellatrix Lestrange, and Narcissa Malfoy. They're great Dark witches."

Harry swallowed. I think that's why Sirius was able to slip my Fugitivus Animus. His mind is trained, like Snape's. "Narcissa Malfoy never used any Dark spells that I saw."

Connor cocked his head. "Oh, yeah. Sorry, Harry. I just keep forgetting that you stayed with the Malfoys. It's strange, you know?" He shook his head. "Now that I've been reading history, I can see how far back the devotion of the Potters to the Light goes, and how far the devotion of the Malfoys to the Dark. Just because Mrs. Malfoy didn't practice Dark spells in front of you doesn't mean she doesn't."

"I know," said Harry, because he did, and friendship with Draco didn't mean his parents didn't use Dark magic. He felt the first premonition

of what might come, like a fishhook in his heart. He was loyal to Connor, he knew that. He wanted to protect him. He had to protect him.

And he was loyal to Draco, too. He didn't want to say that his parents used Dark magic (despite the fact that he knew Lucius Malfoy had done so). He didn't want to prepare to fight him or his family one day (despite the fact that he would have to do so, unless the Malfoys unexpectedly declared for the Light). He didn't want to think of giving up their friendship or his Portkey.

I never thought I would be the one being pulled, Harry thought. I always thought it would be Draco, because I would go with Connor without trouble.

And now?

Now...he didn't know.

Harry swallowed. Freedom was terrifying, then, as well as thrilling. Again, it felt like something he should have known, but something he was learning for the first time nonetheless.

What am I, if not a person who would uncritically choose my brother over everyone else?

He hesitated, then found an answer he could live with. Someone who would try to reconcile both sides for as long as he could.

"Harry?" Connor peered at him. "I think you drifted off."

Harry shook his head and sat up again. "Sorry."

Connor nodded. "That's all right. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to be training with Sirius this year, and continuing my studies of history." He clenched his jaw, and gave a grim smile. His hazel eyes blazed. "Tom Riddle was good for me, you know? In an odd way. He let me see that you've been right, that I can't just run around playing all the time when I should be preparing for the war, that I have responsibilities if I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry nodded. He said nothing more. Saying that he, himself, was suddenly uncertain of his own responsibilities would have sounded as though he were whining for pity, however true it was.

Snape nodded at the knock on the door of his office. One thing that hadn't changed in Harry, and which he hoped never would, was the boy's punctuality, whether he was coming to detention or to a private lesson as this one was.

At least, Snape assumed it was a private lesson. Harry had simply found him that morning and asked to come visit him that evening. Pleased that their argument after Minerva left them yesterday hadn't driven the boy into a sulk, Snape had granted his permission.

Harry came in now looking half-haunted, rubbing his arm and biting his lip. Snape narrowed his eyes. "Has someone hexed you?" he asked.

Harry blinked, and Snape realized how far away he must have been. "No, sir," he said. "I had an argument with Draco." He shifted his sleeve up his shoulder, but not before Snape caught a glimpse of a bruise in the shape of a hand.

"And what did you and Mr. Malfoy argue about, Harry?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and evaluating the boy. Harry didn't flush and stammer the way he might have when confronted with an uncomfortable truth last year; nor did he lie his way out of it, his eyes on the wall behind Snape's desk so the professor couldn't use Legilimency on him. He just looked perplexed.

"I don't know, sir," he admitted. "I knew that he didn't like my being absent from the train yesterday, and he didn't like it when Professor McGonagall paired him up with Hermione in Transfiguration—"

"I had not thought Miss Granger was in that class." Snape quashed his irritation at Minerva's apparent do-gooding. He had known when he tried to bring her in on the boy's side that she would go her own way, and do things in a Gryffindorish fashion however much he might try to persuade her otherwise.

"Well, she didn't used to be," Harry admitted. "But the professor moved the timetables around so that we're having class with the Gryffindors now."

Snape nodded, slowly. He supposed Minerva had her reasons for that, and he would find them out if he ever grew irritated enough with her to ask. "Very well. How does that lead to an argument of the kind that you appear to have had with Mr. Malfoy?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, sir," he repeated. "I teased Draco about the train, said that I felt like a pet he was trying to haul around on a leash so that it didn't get too far away from him. Then he flew into a rage and accused me of wanting to get away. We, ah, we started arguing about Connor, and about my coming to Malfoy Manor, and all sorts of things that I didn't know bothered him. Then I said I was coming to a meeting with you, and he grabbed my shoulder and tried to hold me there." Harry paused, and his eyes darted off to the right.

"Out with it, Harry," said Snape, making sure to keep his voice mild and not accusing. He had to encourage the boy to confide in and trust him, if he wanted to have a chance at being Harry's mentor, and perhaps an actual guide and teacher in more subjects than Potions.

Harry shook his head. "My magic flared, because I was angry by then. I didn't think he had any right to keep me there. And Draco immediately let me go and apologized, and said that I should come along before I was late and made you furious at me." Harry stared hard at Snape. "Do you know of any reason that would have caused him to do that, sir?"

Snape sighed. He could think of one, but hearing it would cause Harry much grief. Yet better, he supposed, to cause some little grief than to lie to the boy, as everyone around him had done for much too long. "I think he was afraid, Harry. He has seen what your magic can do."

Harry bit his lip. "Yes. I was afraid it was that, sir." He clenched his hands, and Snape felt the magic lift around him, a buzzing pressure

that leaned against his Malfoy-inspired shields but did not pierce them. “There are times I do want to put my magic away,” Harry said passionately, “just so that it won’t frighten anyone anymore.”

Snape stood. This had been the core of their argument yesterday. He had said that Harry should concentrate on taming his magic more than anything else. The more he insisted on that, the more Harry insisted on staying loyal to his brother and defending him. It was time to take a different tack, then. Snape had suspected it would be. Indirect tactics worked best with Harry.

“Do you think Dumbledore was right?” he asked.

Harry frowned. “Of course not. I told you that I didn’t intend to put the phoenix web back the way it had been.”

Snape concealed his wrath—Harry had explained in more detail about the phoenix web yesterday, too, and it had set Snape thinking of spells he hadn’t used in years—and sneered. “And yet, the phoenix web was meant to bind your magic. If you are thinking of tucking your magic away simply because it might cause consternation and fear in those weaker than you are, you are conceding to Dumbledore, saying that he was right to enslave you in the first place.”

Harry stiffened, and his magic lashed around him. “I am not.”

“Yes, you are,” said Snape, and paused until he felt Harry’s power and temper both build. Then he added, delicately, “Unless you are saying that Dumbledore and your mother put you under the web out of some other emotion? Kindness, perhaps? Worry for your delicate constitution?”

Harry looked away. Snape waited. He had led the boy back to this point before, and he would lead him back as often as was necessary. Harry might not want to talk about the memories aloud, but he couldn’t stop thinking about them, anyway, at least not when someone else forced him to confront them.

“They wanted to keep everyone safe,” Harry murmured. “And that’s what I want, too.”

Snape cocked his head. "And, of course, binding your magic has worked so well in the past to do that," he said. "It must be someone else's magic that grew its own will and personality and did its best to destroy Hogwarts. Do forgive me. Shall I ask Mr. Malfoy how well he remembers that night, perhaps? Or your brother?"

Harry turned around and snarled at him. Snape could feel the magic grow claws and teeth against his shields.

He kept the sneer in place. If this was what Harry needed, then he would do his best to be that kind of person. Someone to rage against, someone he might come close to hurting but would not actually hurt in the way that he might his parents or Dumbledore, someone he appeared to trust despite having many small wounds inflicted against that trust.

And all the while that he might threaten to tear open Snape's mind with his power, he was not caging it, not letting it rot or rot him, not doing the same thing to himself that his parents and Dumbledore had wanted to do.

Snape fully intended to see Harry mix his magic with his own being, not cage it and not restrain it. He also fully intended to live to see the day when that union would be complete.

And then, he thought, his eyes lingering on the lightning bolt scar just barely visible above Harry's agitated green stare, then you will be more than a force to be reckoned with. You will be a force to make peace with, a force to change things with, a force to unite those who have gone shattered and fragmented too long.

Snape had been reading, when he could, about what a vates was over the summer. It had been...enlightening.

"That's the thing, though," Harry said abruptly, in an unhappy tone, and Snape realized he had managed to calm himself while Snape was lost in daydreams. "I want to protect and defend and heal and create, the way you said I should. But the magic only wants to destroy. I don't understand."

Snape shrugged. "I do. You are growing more successful at harnessing your power. You have not harnessed your rage."

Harry laughed. It was not a sound that Snape wanted to hear ever again. "Sometimes I wonder whether it matters," he said. "Our parents left me alone this summer. Sirius is being stupid, but I can deal with him. My brother has finally learned what responsibility means. I want to free Remus from the Obliviate, but once I do that, do I really have to face them? Couldn't I just sort of...stay away from them?"

"You already know the answer to that, Mr. Potter," said Snape, using the boy's last name to get his attention. "You cannot. You must face them, at one point or another, or your rage will not be quiet. And they will never leave you in peace. I saw the way the Headmaster watched you at every meal in the Great Hall today. He will renew that web if he can."

Harry bowed his head.

"And even if you could stay away from them, if they would leave you alone," Snape added quietly, "what do you think the werewolf will do when he gains his memories back? What do you think Minerva will do now that she is convinced those who should have loved you betrayed and harmed you—"

Harry looked up swiftly. "They still love me."

Snape paused, then decided to let that one lie. It might be true, for all he knew, though he could not call the elder Potters' behavior loving. "You have never seen her in battle, Harry," he said. "I have. She is terrifying. There are the Malfoys. There is, perhaps, your godfather, and your brother." He let himself sneer in doubt. If Black and Potter have not yet awakened to every terrifying consequence, they are not going to.

"And there is me," he went on, when he found that Harry's eyes were wide and fixed on him, drinking in what he said. "I had to stop myself

from brewing—certain potions a dozen times this summer. Potions I have perfected, potions that would inflict extremely painful death.”

He had actually been unable to stop himself from making one particular potion, but he had put it on the very back shelf of a locked cabinet and promised himself he would never use it. Probably.

Very likely, at least.

“Would you stop us from doing what we wish in your name?” Snape asked.

“I’d stop you if you were trying to kill someone else,” Harry said, and his eyes were wide and clear, his voice as firm, as it had been yesterday when Minerva questioned him on possibly taking revenge.

Snape nodded. “But you cannot stop us from feeling outrage and grief and hatred.”

Harry gnawed his lip.

“Why is this so hard for you to understand?” Snape persisted. Perhaps this particular direct tactic will work.

“Because I—it’s me,” said Harry. He gave an angry shrug when Snape simply looked at him. “I don’t know. Don’t ask me to explain it,” he said, and his magic stalked around the room like a prowling beast, rocking the vials on their shelves. “But I would understand perfectly if my parents had been abusing Connor and someone found out about it, or if Lucius was casting Dark curses at Draco all the time and I found out about it. Then the outrage and grief and hatred, sure. But I keep trying to put those emotions in the same place with what happened to me and—it doesn’t work.” He shook his head.

Snape tamed what he wanted to say. His thoughts went to the potion on the back shelf of the locked cabinet instead.

Harry took several deep breaths, then looked directly at him. “Actually, sir, I came to ask if I could get your help brewing the Wolfsbane Potion.”

Snape considered pressing the issue, but let it go in the end. Harry was not yet ready. "Afraid that I won't brew it right for your precious Lupin?" he mocked. Harry's eyes flashed, and Snape smirked. Good. Get him angry. "I am sorry to disappoint you, Potter, but I value my reputation as a Potions Master more than I value the thought of getting revenge on that wretched beast."

A vial on the nearest shelf shattered, and Snape regretted going so far—though more for the abashed look on Harry's face as he surveyed what his magic had done than because of the lost potion. It was a Boil Cure potion, easily replaced.

"No, it's not that, sir," Harry said, now looking anywhere but at him. "I promised...well, you see, someone I know is a werewolf, and I promised to brew the Potion for her."

Snape stared at him. Just when he imagined that he understood Harry, the boy came out with a surprise like this. "Who?"

Harry hesitated, then sighed. "Hawthorn Parkinson."

The Red Death. Snape concealed a wince. For all that he had been stronger than the witch when they both served as Death Eaters, he had been wary of her nasty talent for curses involving the blood. "And how exactly did you meet Hawthorn Parkinson?" he asked.

"A meeting in Diagon Alley," said Harry. "I think Millicent arranged it. Maybe. I don't know. It was strange. But I promised Mrs. Parkinson I would try to help her. She got bitten by Fenrir Greyback for refusing to help in some insane plan he has to raise the Dark Lord."

Snape nodded at once. He could see why this would be important, though he suspected he was not seeing it as important for the same reasons Harry was. The boy needed as much training and protection as possible before the Dark Lord returned. Someone who might actively oppose that was to be encouraged. And if Harry could win her gratitude...

Well, there are many less valuable things to have than the good opinion of the Red Death.

"Fetch me unicorn hair and fairy wings from my stores," he said, nodding towards the appropriate cabinets.

Harry moved at once to get them, seeming glad the conversation was over. For that matter, Snape shared the sentiment.

Every time I think we are making progress, he thought, as he eyed Harry's back in resignation, I am reminded how much further we have to walk.

Interlude: Mothers to Sons

September 5th, 1993

Dear Connor:

Yes, you can trust Sirius to teach you the full extent of his compulsion ability, even though he might not want to. I know that it reminds him of the Blacks, of the house that he grew up in and the family he fought so hard to escape. He is a hero, Connor, a hero because of that if nothing else.

But he had to use his compulsion ability to force his family to let him go after he was sixteen and ran away to live with James, and he used it several times on the Death Eaters, too. He knows how to wield it. He knows what a useful weapon it can be. And now that he knows you have it, he would push you to use it, if only to get it properly trained. With the War coming, he will do more than that.

I'm sending you the books that you asked for, *A Practical History of Goblins in the North* by Griphook Fishbaggin and *Making the Most of Your Unexpected Dark Gift*, by Shadwell Willowbranch. I almost thought there was someone else I ought to tell you to share that last book with, but now I forget who it was. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I would urge you to keep that book somewhere safe and secret. Officially, we aren't supposed to know about this, but unofficially, I've had owls from Dumbledore. The Minister, Cornelius Fudge, has apparently been receiving threatening letters from former Death Eaters. The Ministry is moving to restrict the use of Dark magic and the presence of Dark creatures in wizarding Britain. The Wizengamot is already considering ways to restrict the shipping of dangerous Potions ingredients.

I can promise they won't hurt you, Connor, not when you are and will be their hero, but you'll have to keep your head down for a short time.

So much love for my brave, heroic son,

Lily Potter.

September 5th, 1993

Dear my son:

I hope you are well. Please remember the last tales we have talked about. In return, I have another tale for you.

Julia Malfoy lived six hundred years ago. You have heard of her, I am sure. Her portrait hangs in the front hallway—the tall woman with the blue crystal and the enormous gray hound. Lucius likes to refer to her as his Fearsome Aunt. Most of the Malfoys do. She was indeed fearsome, very strong in her power, about which more in a moment, and apparently aunt to a dozen children without having one of her own.

But she was not childless, Draco. I have finished my investigation of our family's private papers, and I have found evidence that I can only call evidence of a conspiracy, to conceal the birth of Julia Malfoy's only child, a son, and pass it off as someone else's. Do you know who that someone else was, Draco?

Octavius Malfoy, who was one of the next generation of Malfoy children whom Julia grew up mothering. He became Lord when his father died, because it was believed that he was the son of Julius Malfoy, Julia's twin brother and the Heir of the line, and his wife.

I have investigated further, and I am convinced that, in this case, your Fearsome Aunt did not become pregnant by some commoner and thus slip baseborn genes into the Malfoy line because the Lord could not sire a child. Octavius was, in fact, Julius's son. Julia seduced her own brother, so that the child would be born purebred Malfoy.

I can imagine your face now, my son. You will be making a horrible one. Not too horrible, of course, because someone else might see you and question it, but a grimace nonetheless.

The important thing about Julia is not that she committed incest, nor even that she passed her son off as the next Lord Malfoy—when, truly, he was It is that she was willing to go to such lengths to insure the Malfoy line's continuance, and she had the magic to do so. Her

brother could not resist her call, but she did not enslave him, either with Imperius or some other spell. She was simply so powerful than when she asked, he did as she bid, dazzled by that which we all crave.

Draco, you will understand in time. I am sending you certain books with my next owl. For now, remember this: I come from the Black family, but no Black mother was ever less determined to protect her children than a Malfoy mother was. I will move mountains for you, Draco. You have only to speak the word, or have a certain look on your face. I have interpreted several such expressions already. Do not fear, my darling. You shall have what you need.

Your loving mother,

Narcissa Black Malfoy.

Chapter Seven: Rise, Like Lions After Slumber

Harry paused when both Draco and Blaise followed him out of the common room on Saturday morning. “Why are you coming to the library?” he asked.

Blaise put his nose up. He was doing that lately. He seemed even more nervous around Harry than he had been last year. Harry supposed the rumors about him spending some time with a Dark Lord in his head had something to do with that. “I’m meeting Patil in the library to discuss our project for Professor McGonagall’s class, of course.”

Harry blinked. “But I’m meeting Connor to discuss it.”

“And I’m meeting Granger,” said Draco, and they all looked at each other.

Harry shook his head. “They must have arranged to meet us all at once, then.” He shrugged. He could understand the sentiment. Connor would probably have been willing to meet Harry on his own, but Hermione had no reason to like Draco, and he would be extremely surprised if Blaise and Parvati knew each other.

“Are they scared?” Blaise muttered as they walked towards the library.
“Scared of the big bad House of Slytherin?”

Harry and Draco exchanged glances. It had only been a week back at school, and already they had noticed what had changed. Blaise had to be blind.

Except for the few members of other Houses who’d already had friendships with Slytherins, like the small group of Hufflepuffs who’d befriended Harry last year after he’d saved Justin Finch-Fletchley from the basilisk, most of them were avoiding Slytherins. Whispers trailed them. From somewhere had come the rumor that Snape had once been a Death Eater, which, while not exactly a secret, wasn’t very common knowledge either. Harry had heard a few people hissing in the corridor at him yesterday. By itself, that would have struck him only as students intent on resurrecting the Parseltongue

scandal from last year, but as part of the larger pattern of abuse and isolation towards Slytherins, it was worrisome.

Draco shrugged now. “They probably are,” he said lightly. “Merlin knows we outmatch them in magic, in brains, in beauty, in blood purity, in everything that matters.”

“Because, of course,” said Harry, taking care not to look at Draco this time, “you weren’t moaning to me the other evening about how you hoped Hermione would do more than half the work on your project, because you know next to nothing about Animagi.”

“There may be gaps in my knowledge,” said Draco, his chin lifting until Harry thought his neck must hurt. “That doesn’t actually mean that Granger is smarter than I am.”

Blaise snickered. Harry resisted the temptation only by a great effort. The back of Draco’s neck flushed.

“You could agree with me once in a while, you know,” he whined at Harry.

Harry raised his eyebrows as they turned into the library corridor. It was true they’d been fighting all week, and over the silliest things—who had snickered at Harry when he got a gob of food stuck to his hair in the Great Hall, how much time Harry spent studying as opposed to talking to Draco, who had said what in a half-remembered argument from the night before. But how could Draco expect Harry to agree with him all the time? Harry was under the impression that that would have bored Draco, anyway.

“I do agree with you,” he said. “I think the Gryffindors are nervous and wanted to meet us in a group. But that doesn’t mean that I think you’re smarter than Hermione.”

Draco pouted at him. That was at least better than shouting, and Harry felt in a relatively good, even hopeful, mood as he stepped into the library and looked around for the Gryffindors.

He spotted Hermione and Parvati almost immediately, sitting at a large table already covered with books. He couldn't see Connor anywhere. He frowned and approached them, then halted as Ron came out from between the shelves and sat down next to Hermione. He'd thought Ron was working with Vince and Greg, who had been firmly snoring in their beds when the other boys left their room.

Ron without Connor to restrain him was trouble. Quite apart from the grudge the Weasley family had always had against the Malfoys, Lucius had tried to get his father sacked permanently last year, and only Sirius's intervention had saved him. And Ron didn't like or trust Harry that much.

Yet he just sat there and watched as the Slytherins approached, and never said a word, though Harry saw him rub his shoulder as though he were wondering if his arm was strong enough to throw a punch that would bring down all of them. His eyes were cool and assessing, though, a look that Harry had never seen in them.

He remembered, abruptly, that Connor had said Ron was an excellent chess player, one who always pounded him into the ground when they played. Harry had the feeling he was seeing the chess master now.

Trying to ignore his own uneasiness, he nodded to Hermione and Parvati. "Hello. Do you know where my brother is?"

"He said something about training," said Parvati, pushing her thick dark hair behind her ears. She was pretty, but the way she was frowning at Blaise somewhat marred it. "He said to tell you he was sorry, but he didn't think he'd be able to get together with you and work on the project today."

Harry blinked, even though he knew where Connor had to be—with Sirius. "Oh." He hesitated as Draco and Blaise took their places at the table, opposite their assigned partners. He was acutely aware that, other than a brief contemptuous flick in Draco's direction, Ron's eyes had never wavered from his face. "I guess I'll go back to the dorm, then, and talk to him later, so we can arrange a different time to meet." He started to turn away.

"Wait, Harry."

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Now he knew something was off. Ron didn't call him Harry, at least not without a lot of prompting. "Yes?" he asked, leaving off the name altogether, since he wasn't sure which to use.

"Stay and work with me," Ron proposed. "You can get your work done, and I'll get mine." He snorted abruptly. "Not that Crabbe and Goyle could help me that much anyway."

"You take that back," said Draco. "Vince and Greg are good friends."

"Shut it, Malfoy," said Ron. "I was talking to Harry." He turned entirely away from Draco, who was left gaping. "What do you say, Harry?" he went on, as if they did this all the time. "It'll give you a head start, anyway."

"I think that's a good idea," Hermione piped in. "I've already written most of the essay—" Draco's relieved expression didn't escape Harry's notice—"but there's so much fascinating information here. Did you realize that the Animagus form always reflects the wizard's or witch's internal nature? Without exception? And that it's the nature they really have, not the image they present to the world?" She began to flip through the book she held. "It says here that Hilda Hufflemark was completely disappointed when her Animagus form turned out to be an earthworm, but—"

"We know, Hermione," said Ron, in a long-suffering fashion. "Come on, Harry." He tapped the table. "We should get started on this, you know."

Harry slowly took the chair. Perhaps he would understand what was going on if he simply spent more time with the Gryffindors, then. He eyed Ron as he opened the first book, but Ron just went on staring at him. It was starting to feel familiar.

It did feel familiar, Harry realized suddenly. It was the way Lucius had stared at him the first time he met Harry, when he went to the Malfoy

Manor for Christmas that first year. He hadn't cared about how rude he was being, because the dance he was dancing required bluntness, even rudeness, to get its point across. He was letting Harry know that he considered him a threat and would size him up accordingly.

But I didn't think any of the Weasleys would teach their children the dances, Harry thought in confusion.

Very well, then. Harry hadn't felt inclined to question Lucius's staring. He would question this. Lucius had already known that Harry didn't trust him. Ron might not know that.

"Stop that," he said, sharply but quietly enough that it just stayed between them, leaning forward. "What do you want?"

"To figure out why my shoulder's hurting," said Ron, and touched his right shoulder blade.

Harry blinked, lost.

Ron raised an eyebrow for a moment, and his face melted back into the expression that Harry was more familiar with, impatience mixed with contempt. "You really don't get it, do you?" he asked.

Harry settled himself again. This was familiar. He could deal with this. He wanted familiar things that he could deal with. Enough had changed in the past year. "Of course not," he said. "I have no idea what your shoulder blade hurting has to do with our Transfiguration project." He turned back to the book in front of him. The Ministry has long required that dangerous wizards and witches register with them, but in the present time, only the Animagus Registration is specifically required, for a number of reasons...

Ron tapped the page in front of him. "Come with me," he said, and he had the chess player look in his eyes again. He walked away between the shelves.

Harry hesitated, but Blaise and Parvati were arguing, almost nose-to-nose, and Hermione was rattling off a long series of facts to Draco,

who was playing the captive audience well enough to half-fool Harry. No one seemed to notice as he stood and slipped after Ron.

I have to keep having mysterious meetings with people in shadowed corners, don't I? he wondered as he came to a halt in front of Ron near the back end of one aisle. "What—" he began.

"Shhh," said Ron.

Harry rolled his eyes, but was quiet. Someone on the other side of the shelf finally moved away, and Ron relaxed and glanced at him. "My shoulder blades have been itching all week," he said. "It felt like I was going to sprout wings. And Percy's been feeling the same thing, and the twins. The twins just claim it's one of their products, of course." He eyed Harry.

"How do you know it's not?" Harry had to ask. He had seen last year that the Weasley twins would prank anyone. Ron shouldn't be excepted just because he was family.

"Because," said Ron patiently, "I know what it is. I think Percy does, too, but he just gets a scared expression on his face whenever I ask him about it. He's always going to talk to Headmaster Dumbledore. I think he's involved in something he doesn't want the rest of us to know about. And Fred and George refuse to take it seriously, of course." He shrugged. "It's the way the Weasley family feels a powerful wizard's magic. You know, like the way that the McGonagall family feels it as wind across their skin."

"How do you know about that?" Harry asked.

"I was taught it." Ron looked more confused. "I thought you were being obtuse to act all cool and Slytherin about it, but you aren't, are you? You really didn't know."

Harry shook his head. "I—Draco can feel my magic, he's told me so, but I thought it was just something he was trained to do, some special ability he had. I didn't know that other pureblood families could do it, too." He tried to push aside any worry and give in to his curiosity instead. "Can all pureblood families do it?"

"I suppose so." Ron shrugged again. "I don't know all the signs. But it's an obvious survival skill, isn't it? After all, purebloods were the only part of wizarding society that was really accepted for a long time, and—well, don't tell Hermione, but even if there were powerful Muggleborns then, it wasn't like anyone was going to admit it. They got killed instead. But we had to know how to spot a powerful wizard or witch right away, just in case he or she started wanting to conquer us or gather followers." He sounded as if he were quoting someone, and grinned abruptly, lapsing back into his normal voice. "Don't tell Mum, but I always hated that part of the lecture. She sounded as though she was about to faint."

Harry snickered in spite of himself, but he had gone back to confused again. "All right, you can feel my magic. Sorry. I'll try to tone it down. But why did you stare at me the way you did?"

"Because I want to know what you're going to do," said Ron. "So do the rest of us, really." He scowled. "Except Fred and George. They just assume that you'll play the best practical jokes, because that's what they'd do, and they're waiting to see what happens, so they can take notes."

Harry shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm going to protect Connor."

Ron peered at him skeptically. "You're going to use all that magic just to do that?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Why not? It's pretty complicated, anyway, since my brother's got You-Know-Who after him." There were other things he might do, but whenever he thought of them, he tumbled into the deep pit of rage that Snape had made him explore every night Harry visited him so far. He wanted to do something to strike back against his parents, but he knew he would regret it the moment he did. He regretted thinking about it.

"It's more than that, though," said Ron. "The powerful witches and wizards in the past always did something. Maybe you can turn Malfoy into a toad." He looked hopeful.

Harry rolled his eyes. "He's my friend. I'm not going to do that."

"A ferret, then?" Ron suggested. "He looks like a ferret."

Harry shook his head and turned back towards the table, deciding their conversation was over. Ron clutched his arm and held him back. Harry glared at him.

Ron promptly dropped his hand and backed away, his palms spread in a gesture of surrender.

Harry swallowed. "Why are you doing that?"

Ron cocked an eyebrow at him. "Because your magic surges when you're angry, mate. And right now I feel like I'm going to sprout feathers." With a grimace, he scratched roughly at his shoulders. "I don't want you to get angry at me and do something to me," he added.

"Is everyone going to think that?" Harry felt a deep curdle of fear in his stomach. It had been bad enough when Draco seemed to be afraid of him, but Draco had seen the full extent of his magic and knew what he was capable of, so Harry could understand even though he didn't like it. But if everyone started fearing him just based on his anger...Harry would have no option but to bind and hide the rage again. Snape would just have to understand.

"Every pureblood wizard, anyway," Ron corrected him. "I think some of the Muggleborns might feel you, too, like Hermione. She's strong," he added, as if Harry wouldn't have known that already. "But that's why you tell us what you're going to do. If you're not going to go crazy and enslave the world like—like You-Know-Who—" Ron glanced around as if Voldemort might be hiding behind the History of Magic books—"—then we shouldn't have a reason to be afraid of you."

Harry shook his head. "I'm going to protect my brother."

"Not enough, mate." Ron's eyes were kind, but appraising once again. "No one's going to believe it. Do you think anyone would believe Headmaster Dumbledore—I mean, really believe him—if he said that

he was going to live in a little cottage and grow roses for the rest of his life?"

"Maybe," Harry muttered, his rage flaring again at the thought of the Headmaster Ron winced and touched his left shoulder. Harry tried to calm down. "What's the phrase? Famously eccentric?"

Ron laughed. "Yeah. But he's earned the right to be left in peace, really. We know that he killed Grindelwald and everything. We trust that he'll use his magic for good, and we know that You-Know-Who will use his magic for evil. We don't know what you're going to do, yet." He tilted his head. "I wonder if that's what's got Percy so nervous. I know that he had to follow you last year. Maybe I can ask him what he saw that the rest of us didn't."

"Or you could ask me," Harry had to point out, "since you have me right in front of you."

Ron rubbed the back of his neck as his face flushed. "Yeah. Sorry. What did you do last year? Why couldn't we feel you then?"

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea." He was lying, of course. The phoenix web would have bound his magic much more strongly then, and kept a good part of its full strength beneath the surface of his mind. "If it helps, Draco's been able to sense my magic since first year," he added, to get Ron's mind off the potentially dangerous track of what might have happened last year. He didn't mind if Death Eaters knew what he had done in the Chamber, not when it might intimidate them or make them think of him as a better target than his brother. He didn't want Ron, who was a Gryffindor through and through, to find out that Connor hadn't really been a hero.

"Yes, but you were a git first year," said Ron. "Maybe it was just a case of gits drawing together."

Harry glared at him. "Sometimes I don't know if you're really serious or not about wanting to know what I'm going to do," he said.

"Of course I am," said Ron, his smile melting. "I was trying to make you more comfortable, Harry. I really don't want you angry. No

pureblood wizard in the school wants you angry anymore. The sooner you get this settled, the better.”

“And how can I possibly tell everyone what I intend to do for the rest of my life?” Harry demanded.

Ron shrugged, unconcerned. “You could file an announcement with the Ministry, to be read in every part of Britain, if you really wanted to. Maybe not,” he amended, when Harry gave him a horrified glance. “Or you could just tack a sign up somewhere to reassure everyone who’s been feeling the magic and doesn’t know where it’s coming from what happened, and that you don’t intend to harm anybody.”

“It’s none of their business,” said Harry.

Ron raised his eyebrows. “When you’re this strong, it becomes everybody’s business, Harry,” he said. “Just like the Minister has to know everything about Dumbledore’s movements, and everyone gets nervous of You-Know-Who. That’s just the way it is. You’re realigning power structures just by walking around.”

“But—“ Harry swallowed back his panic. He couldn’t say why he got so nervous about having attention paid to him without drawing more attention, and talking about the way Lily had trained him. And that really was not everybody’s business. Harry would sacrifice privacy about his magic before he would talk about his training. “I’m just thirteen years old. No one’s going to listen to a kid, anyway.”

Ron shook his head slowly. “That’s just going to make them more nervous.”

“What is?”

“That you have this kind of power, and you’re so young.” Ron cocked his head and eyed him thoughtfully. “This time you have right now is really a gift, you know. No one’s sure what’s going on. They think you might still be good. Or they don’t know that you’re the source of the magic. I was only sure when you walked into the library this morning, and Fred and George think they know, but they’re more enchanted with the idea than anything. But people are going to write to their

parents soon, Harry. People outside Hogwarts are going to pay attention. You haven't got long before someone tries to assume custody of you, for your own good."

"My parents—"

"Don't seem to have trained you to take care of your magic," said Ron. "That'll probably be the first argument they try. Watch out, Harry."

"Why are you telling me about this?" Harry whispered, closing his eyes. He could feel his heart pounding as walls seemed to close in around him. He didn't want this to happen. He wanted to be as normal as he could, to go back to the shadows he'd been guarding Connor from. Just because he knew the truth, and a few other people did, didn't mean everything had to change. And now this was happening.

"Because," said Ron, "you're my best mate's brother, and that makes you kind of like my brother, too." Harry opened his eyes to see him grimacing, probably at having to call a Slytherin brother. "And you're something really special to Connor. Did you know that? The way his face lights up when he talks about you..." Ron sighed. "I'd give a lot if someone's face lit up like that for me. Ginny, maybe."

"But you still don't like me much," Harry summarized.

"You're a Slytherin," Ron answered bluntly. "And that makes me nervous." Gryffindor honesty, Harry thought, meeting his eyes. They're not supposed to be nervous, but if they are, they usually admit it, even to people they really shouldn't be admitting it to. "And now you're dithering on what to do. That's just stupid, Harry. I'll grant that you don't know much about this, and I thought you did, and I'm sorry for that. But you know now. You've got to move."

Harry closed his eyes. "And what do you think the rest of the school would do, if I announced that I was some powerful wizard?" he whispered.

Ron's hand clasped his shoulder. Harry let his eyes blink open under the unexpected touch. "Some Ravenclaws will probably want to study

you," said Ron casually, "and the rest will panic. Slytherin'll probably think you're just great. Another powerful wizard who talks to snakes? Wonderful!"

Harry tried to pull away, but Ron kept him there.

"The Hufflepuffs might stand by you, at least your friends, while the rest of them panic," he said. "And we'll fight you if we have to. I know that you think Gryffindors are unfairly favored—"

"I never said that."

"All Slytherins think that." Ron waved a hand. "You can't help it, I suppose. The thing is, one reason Gryffindors are favored—my parents told me all about this—is because of the First War. Everyone else dithered around trying to decide what to do, or slunk away to join You-Know-Who. Gryffindors were the ones who went down there and fought."

"And died," Harry whispered, remembering a list of casualties he'd once seen divided by House affiliation. Gryffindor had outnumbered all the rest combined. Harry had thought it was because Voldemort hated them the most and sought them out at first, or because they were overrepresented in the Aurors. Now he wondered if it really was the kind of rash courage Ron was praising.

"Yes, that too." Ron sounded surprisingly unruffled. "But that means that you'll have a whole bunch of people who fight you if you turn out to be an evil wizard. But look at it like this: we'll fight for you if you turn out to be a Light wizard. Our house is strongest in the Light."

Harry thought of arguing that, but could only scrub at his eyes instead. "Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Why talk about fighting and dying for someone you barely knew?"

"Connor wrote to me a lot over the summer," said Ron, and his face clouded for a moment. "He told me about the Chamber, and the battle with Voldemort first year in detail, and—and other things, things he's dreamed about." He stared hard at Harry. "I know why he isn't here today."

Caught speechless, Harry could only nod.

"So he said he understood if I wanted to stop being his friend and go befriend someone else less dangerous." Ron shrugged. "I thought about it a lot. But I finally wrote back and said I still wanted to be friends with him. And if that means thinking about fighting and dying, then I will."

Harry eyed him. Ron appeared utterly sincere. Harry thought he might be less than sincere if he was on the other end of a Death Eater's wand.

But...

There was courage here, too. And no one in Slytherin had told Harry about what consequences his magic might have. He nodded at Ron.

"Thanks," he said, his voice hoarse with something that sounded embarrassingly like gratitude.

"No problem," said Ron. "At least now I know why you weren't doing anything. But do something soon, all right?" He abruptly turned his head to look at the end of the row of shelves. "What do you want, Malfoy?"

"I want to know what you're doing with my friend, Weasley." Draco sneered at him and stared hard at Harry. "And what you were doing with him."

There was no mistaking the jealousy in his voice. Harry shook his head. It wasn't worth arguing about. "Talking about chess," he said, and Ron caught his eye and gave him an odd half-smile.

"Yeah," he said, and walked past Harry and around Draco, giving him a sneer of his own for good measure. It wasn't as practiced as Snape's, Harry thought, but not many people's were. "See you later, Harry."

"What was that all about?" Draco demanded.

Harry glared at him. "Strange as it might seem, Draco, I don't have to explain every one of my movements to you."

Draco clenched one hand. He couldn't explain why this was so important without making Harry misunderstand him. And anyway, he'd tried all week, and Harry just kept being stubborn at him.

Why do you need to know where I go, Draco?

Why do you care what time I come back to the dorms, Draco?

Why does it matter to you that I wasn't on the Hogwarts Express, Draco?

And Draco wanted to say that he felt as though he gave everything he had to the friendship with Harry and Harry gave him back nothing in return except what he gave everyone, unconsciously, and the least he could do was reserve that unconscious giving for Draco himself.

But Harry wouldn't understand. Draco had seen that already. He didn't grasp that he was important enough for Draco to feel jealous over, that he was important enough to want to have private conversations with, that Draco was in agony every day over the mental and magical damage he was still suffering.

Oh, he could understand those things when they were applied to other people. He felt jealous over the time his brother spent with other people, that much was plain, and he respected the private conversations that Draco had with Vince and Greg over people they'd known from childhood, and he worried about Draco in every aspect except the ones that had to do with him. But the most he could do with the emotions people felt for him was accept that they existed. He couldn't understand why.

It was killing Draco, slowly—that this was happening, that he couldn't do anything to take revenge on the people who'd done it to him without hurting Harry further, that Harry wouldn't understand even if Draco did take revenge, that it was costing him so much of himself and he got so little in return.

He turned abruptly and ran out of the library, ignoring Harry's startled cry behind him and the shrill voice of Granger as she tried to command him to return to their table. He hurried upwards, heading steadily for the Owlery. No one should be up there at this time of the day on a Saturday. Sensible people were asleep or outside.

No one was there, and Draco stood in silence amid the shifting rustles of feathers and legs and the deep smell of owl pellets. He'd taken several deep breaths, filled his lungs with the musk, and started to think about offering a treat to Imperius, his own owl, when a tawny owl spiraled in through the window and aimed straight for him.

Startled, Draco let the bird land on his shoulder. It had a letter bound around its leg, and he unbound it and scooped up a handful of treats from another owl's bowl to put in the bird's pouch. It hooted disapprovingly at him, but flew over to another perch and settled down to eat.

Draco read the letter.

It was from his mother, and while he did make the horrible face she talked about in it, he was more intrigued by the last three lines.

I will move mountains for you, Draco. You have only to speak the word, or have a certain look on your face. I have interpreted several such expressions already. Do not fear, my darling. You shall have what you need.

Draco closed his eyes. He wondered for a moment if it was entirely fair to ask his mother for what he needed next.

Then he decided, To Azkaban with fair. I need this. I need her to help me heal Harry, to make him stop hurting.

He turned hastily to fetch parchment and quill, to write back. The possibility of an end to the pain was as glorious as it would have been to have Harry come to him, all apologetic and humble, to ask Draco to explain what was going on.

He felt considerably lighter of heart as he watched Imperius wing his way into the sky, bearing his letter.

Mum will make it better again.

Chapter Eight: Omens of a Leadership Accepted

Harry lay on his bed in the Slytherin dorms and gnawed on his lip as he stared up at the Marauder's Map. He could see both Sirius and Connor clearly—positioned in a room on the seventh floor. They hadn't moved in hours.

He was fighting down the temptation to go and ask if his brother was all right. Connor had spent both days of the weekend with Sirius, as Harry had learned from a run-in with Ron that morning. He didn't appear to do any homework. He hadn't come to the Great Hall to get something to eat. He wasn't doing anything that Harry would say was normal and everyday for Connor to do.

Could he really be taking his duties as seriously as that?

Harry sighed and started to speak the words to clear the map, then paused as one of the dots abruptly left the room. He watched as "Connor Potter" moved downwards through Hogwarts, and only admitted the truth when he saw the dot approaching the dungeons.

He's coming to see me.

Harry scrambled off the bed, tapping the map with his wand and murmuring, "Mischief managed." Luckily, no one else was in the dorms right now; Vince and Greg were Merlin knew where, Blaise had gone to the library, and Draco was curled up in the common room with some books his mother had sent him earlier today.

Of course, Harry would have to cross through the common room to get to the door. He hesitated, sighed, then decided it couldn't be helped. Besides, it wasn't like he was afraid of Draco.

More like afraid to make him afraid of me, he thought, as he cautiously crept down the stairs and into the common room.

Draco looked up when he passed through the door, but returned immediately to his book. Harry told himself he was pleased, not worried. If Draco was reading, then he couldn't be fighting with Harry.

I wish I knew what he was reading, though. The books had no titles, on either the spines or the covers, only designs. Harry had recognized one of them—the rearing silver serpent of the Guile family, the last member of whom had been killed fighting in the Dark Lord Grindelwald's army. It didn't surprise Harry that the Malfoy library would include books about or by the Guiles, but he hoped Draco was careful in what he pulled out of them.

And, I'll admit it, madly curious to know what's in there, he added, as he came out of the common room door just in time to meet Connor's running charge.

Connor paused when he saw him, blinked, then said, "Oh, right. The map. Of course." Grinning, he shook his head and charged on, catching Harry up in a hug. Harry hugged him back, surprised. He always forgot that Connor was a little taller than he was now until reminded of it by his weight and size.

Harry waited until Connor danced back from him, grinning like an idiot, and then managed, "To what do I owe the honor?"

Connor laughed, the sound rising like water in spring. "Harry! I've been reading one of the books that Mum sent me, and then Sirius told me about something he heard once, and I put it together, and he said it was right, and it was! It was right!" He laughed and spun around, his hands raised above his head.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, unable to stop the smile, and then said, "Connor. I can't share your head. Tell me what you're talking about, please?"

Connor managed to calm down, though he was still grinning. "Sorry, Harry. But—well, look. Have you ever heard of an author named Griphook Fishbaggin?"

Harry frowned. "That sounds goblin."

"He was," said Connor, and then shrugged. "Well, except I don't think goblins have last names, so maybe he was adopted by them or something. Anyway, he wrote a book that I asked Mum to send me,

because I'd read about goblins being allies of wizards and enemies of wizards, and I thought I should know if they were likely to be my allies or my enemies. And he mentioned this—thing." Connor waved a hand. "Concept. Idea. I don't know, it's hard to explain without seeing the whole thing. He gave it about sixty different names, anyway. There are whole pages in his book just devoted to explaining what the names mean in Gobbledygook."

Harry nodded. "And you figured out what the thing was?"

Connor grinned. "Yes! The closest human name is probably prophet. The goblins have a rumor, or a prophecy—except Fishbaggin always insists that it's not that, but then he translates the word as prophet again—that someday a great leader will arise and be able to command them. He'll have all these different duties. And they'll help him face his enemies, including this 'one of darkness.'" Connor paused for a long moment, and Harry waited. He knew when his brother meant to speak another word.

"And the best thing," Connor whispered, "the best thing, Harry, is that Fishbaggin always uses the same word to talk about the duty of command."

"What was it?" Harry asked.

"Hm? Well, I don't know. I don't know how to pronounce the Gobbledygook." Connor's eyes were shining. "But I mentioned it to Sirius, and he translated it for me. It means someone with the compulsion gift, like I have." He looked up, face on fire. "That means it's not Dark after all, Harry! I asked Sirius about that, and he confirmed it. How can it be, when prophecies are running around saying that I have to have it in order to be this sort of prophet to the goblins?"

Harry blinked, and then had an armful of his brother again. Connor hugged him hard, then broke away. "Sorry," he said. "I've got to tell Ron. He'll be wondering where I was, anyway. But I wanted to tell you first."

Harry looked at him sideways. "Why?"

Connor's stare back was blank. "You're my brother," he said, as though that explained everything, and it probably did. Then he was gone, with a cheerful wave, dashing up the corridor and towards the steps out of the dungeon.

Harry leaned on the wall and closed his eyes. He wanted to believe Connor. He wanted to be sure that his brother really did carry a Light gift and not a Dark one, if only for his own peace of mind.

But he could still hear Remus, saying that the Dark Arts were based on compulsion. He'd confirmed that Imperio was the quintessential Dark curse when Harry asked him. And if what Connor—and Sirius—could do was a version of that, then how could it be Light?

Harry took a deep breath and got his thoughts under control. You're letting your prejudices run away with you, he snapped at himself. You didn't even congratulate Connor on this new position of his—one he's thrilled to accept, one you would have been happy to see him accept, too, last year. It's so good that he's finally standing up and taking responsibility, isn't it? And you and your silly prejudices are going to ruin it all. He's stuck by you since he found out that you weren't really a new Dark Lord, just possessed. Why shouldn't you stick by him? So you have this uneasiness with compulsion. That doesn't mean it can't be done in the name of war or to justify a greater good.

But that made it sound as though what Dumbledore had done was right.

Harry made up a thought and repeated it to himself. My brother is not Dumbledore. Connor is who he needs to be, who he was born to be, who Voldemort marked him to be. He always will be. He's good. He's right about the potential of this gift, and it turns out the Dark has never touched him. That's all.

Now he only had to repeat that thought to himself, again and again, until he believed it.

Harry. Can you meet me in the Charms corridor tonight at seven?

The note was unsigned, but Harry recognized Connor's handwriting, and the owl that had brought the scrap of parchment was certainly one of the school owls. He looked up, caught his brother's eye across the Great Hall, and nodded. Connor looked confused for a moment, then smiled.

Just as well, Harry thought, tucking the note into a pocket of his robes. That will give me an excuse to avoid Draco this evening.

Draco had spent the first three days of the week ignoring Harry as he read, but that day, Thursday, he'd come out of his trance with a vengeance. Now he was staring. He peppered Harry with random questions—his favorite color, what kind of food he liked best, whether he really wanted to stick his fork into his mouth while acting just like a barbarian or a Weasley and talking all the time. Harry had tried to answer as patiently as he could. He was afraid his patience was about to run out.

He had tried to ask Draco, and a few other members of Slytherin House, why they hadn't told him about the power that Ron sensed. Millicent just smiled and looked secretive. Pansy changed the subject to ask how the brewing of her mother's Wolfsbane Potion was going. Blaise made up moronic excuses and fled when Harry didn't believe them.

Draco just didn't let him get a word in edgewise, and now he was at it again.

"What was that note, Harry?" he asked. "Who was it from?"

"No one important," said Harry, trying to concentrate on his treacle tart. It had been Sylarana's favorite treat. Currently, one of his self-tests, along with avoiding his rage as much as possible and controlling his magic, was to see how often he could approach the memories of her and turn them good instead of evil. Granted, he would often feel a hitch in his breathing or a burn in his eyes during one of the tests, but that was better than the horrible closeness to tears he'd endured before.

"Tell me," said Draco. "I want you to tell me."

Harry glanced sideways. Draco was staring at him again—Ron's intent gaze, Lucius's intent gaze, the gaze of a pureblood in the dance. Harry shook his head slightly. "I don't want to."

Draco reached out and put a hand on Harry's arm, near the place where he'd bruised him last week. Harry felt his anger, and his magic, flare at the thought of being manhandled like that again.

Draco at once dropped his hand and smiled at him. "That's all right, Harry. You don't have to if you don't want to."

Harry blinked at him. And a moment later, Draco's face went hard again and he nodded, exactly as if he had confirmed something about Harry that he had been waiting to ask him.

It was too much strangeness for one evening. Harry stood up. "I have to go to the library and work with Connor on our Transfiguration project," he said.

"Your brother hasn't moved from his table." Draco leaned back in his chair and studied Harry coolly.

Harry shrugged. "He said he'd be along later." He walked away from the Slytherin table, knowing that everyone could tell he was agitated from his stride, and not caring. Of course, now that he was aware of it, he could see heads turning at the tables he passed, hands rubbing noses or eyes or arms, and suspicion dawning into certainty on many pureblood faces.

You have to do something, Ron's voice rang in his head, and Harry clenched his teeth. Yes, he had to do something, he had accepted that, but he didn't have to like it.

He calmed his magic with an enormous effort, reminding himself that the last time Connor had met him privately, it had been to tell him good news. He would probably have more good news to tell him this time. Harry was looking forward to it after such a trying day.

He reached the Charms corridor and cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself to keep him hidden until Connor came. A few students ambled past him, talking about nothing particularly exciting. Harry was glad. He used the minutes he was alone to close his eyes and count to ten. He'd learned the words for the numbers in Gobbledygook and Mermish specifically to give him something to pass the time with. Figuring out how to pronounce the rush of goblin consonants or the insistent twanging of Mermish, which was really meant to be spoken underwater, took almost all his concentration; he'd never been that gifted with languages.

"Harry?"

Harry blinked. Connor was in front of him, peering around as though he thought Harry might not be there yet. Harry dispelled the charm. "Connor, there you are."

Connor grinned at him. "Yes. Here I am." He let out a little breath. "And, Harry, I have a favor to ask you." He squinted and licked his lips as though he couldn't wait to ask the favor and didn't want to ask it at the same time.

Harry raised his eyebrows. He was thrilled at the thought of doing something for his brother, but letting that show would result in questions he didn't want to answer right now. Connor still didn't know about the full extent of his training. "Yes?"

"Well, see..." Connor scuffed his trainer on the floor. "The problem is Ginny Weasley."

Harry blinked. "Ron's little sister?"

Connor nodded. "See, she has a crush on me or something." His cheeks grew bright red. "I don't know why. But lately she's been tagging after me wherever I go. The Great Hall, the Gryffindor Tower—and to lessons with Sirius. And I don't often see her. She's really quick, and clever."

"You want me to stop her?" Harry asked doubtfully.

Connor nodded. "I thought of a way to do it, but I don't have the skills, and Hermione is Ginny's friend. Could you—could you brew the Polyjuice Potion, so you could look like me, and distract her sometimes?"

Harry cocked his head. "The Polyjuice Potion isn't quick, Connor," he warned his brother. "It would take some time before I could have it ready, and in the meantime, Ginny would still be following you everywhere. Besides, maybe she'll get tired of it before the Potion's finished."

"Even knowing that it would take a while, I'd still welcome it," said Connor. "And Ron says she doesn't give up. Ever. She waited a whole year once, but she got Percy back for turning her favorite teddy bear into a snake, even though it was an accident. I think she'll still be following me around in October. And Sirius says he has to step up my training." He pouted. "Please, Harry?"

Harry sighed, then nodded. "All right. I need a piece of your hair, though. Otherwise the Potion won't work."

"That's no problem," said Connor with relief, and plucked a hair from his head, holding it out to Harry.

Harry took it and felt a jolting tingle race up his arm. A moment later, he felt the very familiar sensation of the cracked and broken phoenix web attempting to repair itself.

He tried to jump, tried to shout, tried to reach for his wand. Instead, he stood still, caught in a full body-bind, and watched as the illusion of Connor in front of him melted away to reveal Albus Dumbledore, stern-faced and sad-eyed.

"I am sorry that it must come to this, my boy," he said, holding up his wand. "But I cannot allow you to reverse the choices that you have made, nor turn the whole world topsy-turvy for the sake of your magic's freedom. You will be happier when the web is restored, I promise. Right now you are not only unhappy, but making others so."

Harry tried to open his hand, tried to let the hair fall, and found out he could not. His wards, too, the ones that kept him immune to Dumbledore's magic, were gone as though they had never been. It had to be the hair, he thought. Dumbledore had enchanted it with spells to dispel the wards and hold him still, and once it touched bare skin, that had been the end of it. Or maybe it really was Connor's hair, and depended on the blood connection between them.

Dumbledore waited a moment, as though expecting Harry to nod or say something in agreement, and then seemed to remember he was under the body-bind. He sighed.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "Expleo penuriam—"

He cried out abruptly, and turned, his wand falling from his hand in shock and pain. Harry had time to see a small gray rat clinging furiously to Dumbledore's ankle before it rolled off, dodging a bright white spark that leaped from Dumbledore's robes, and transformed into Peter.

"I've been watching," was the first thing Peter said, backing up so he was in between Dumbledore and Harry. Deftly, he reached out and plucked the hair from Harry's hand, and Harry relaxed and let out a loud breath. His magic rose up around him. Peter didn't seem to notice, his eyes still on Dumbledore. "Did you think I'd let you get away with this?"

Dumbledore didn't say anything, but a bright red curse leaped from his wand, even though it was lying on the floor, and came for Peter. Harry realized that Peter didn't intend to move aside.

He growled, exasperated—standing in front of danger and turning it from other people was his place, not Peter's—and called his near-instinctive Protego. It manifested in front of Peter and bounced the spell back in Dumbledore's direction. Of course, the curse dissipated harmlessly before it got that far.

Harry was left riding his magic, which had a hard core of the substantial, silent rage he'd locked in his box. The wall behind him

had already turned to ice. He breathed, deeply and quietly, and told his magic, No. We are defending only.

It didn't object, but the air in front of him turned cold enough that he could see his breath. Dumbledore was watching them thoughtfully, as poised as though he had never lost control and fired a curse. If he noticed the frost creeping towards him, he preferred to give no sign that he noticed it.

When he spoke, his voice was laden with sadness. "Peter, Peter, Peter. Do you know what you have done? Do you know that you may have put the wizarding world itself in danger with your reckless actions?" He shook his head, slowly, his eyes disappointed. "So little remains of the boy I once knew, the boy who swore he would give up everything to save his friends."

Harry felt the touch of the truth like a wind on his neck. Is Peter—did he really go to Azkaban on Dumbledore's orders, then? Did he really leave us open to attack by Voldemort because Dumbledore wanted him to?

That would mean that Dumbledore had left Connor open to attack.

It was only the channels that Harry had carved into himself over the summer, the ones that he knew and which his magic usually tried to run in, that kept them all from dying then. He felt the building of an explosion that would have torn his body and Peter's apart at the same time as it would have killed Dumbledore, and sealed the channels.

No.

He rocked on his feet as the magic roared at him for his balking and turned on him, scraping his mind with harsh claws. He could feel his mouth straining in a silent scream, but he forced it back down, forced the magic back down, forced the impulse to destroy back down. He was master of his magic, and master of himself. He needed no one else challenging him for that title.

It took him a long moment to come back to himself, to still the washing tides of magic in him as they sloshed from one side to the other and ceased to wound him. Only then could he attend to Peter's voice, which had lost the mockery it held earlier and gone straight into incandescent rage.

"...look at him, Albus. Look what you've done. This is a child, a bloody child, Lily and James's son. You once claimed to love them, you said you'd do anything for them, you moved mountains to help them. And Sirius and Remus, too. You kept any of us from being expelled after Remus nearly killed Snape. Is this the proof of the love you offer? Is this what happens to our children even if it doesn't happen to us? Look at him and tell me you can do this."

"I can do this," said Dumbledore, his voice still sad beyond measure. "I must, Peter." His face was stern when Harry looked at him. "You knew the cost when you paid it. Harry knew the cost when he paid his."

"I changed my mind," said Peter bluntly. "And I've shattered the web, Albus. I'm here on my own, not because the insanity that you forced me into pretending finally took me."

Dumbledore had a moment of clear and obvious shock. Harry blinked. He didn't expect Peter to say that.

Does he think the web can't be broken?

Dumbledore had already recovered, though, and his face was beyond stern. It reminded Harry of the face he'd seen in the Pensieve memory, when Dumbledore had come to Godric's Hollow to bind him. "Certain choices cannot be changed, Peter. I told you this when I gave you the web. Still you swore to me that you wanted it, that you were doing this of your own free will."

"You never gave Harry that choice," said Peter. "And that sickens me."

Dumbledore shook his head. His power was rising around him, and Harry knew that he would attempt to break through the Protego shield

in a moment. "Harry had his choice and his chance. It was only the greatest of misfortunes that led him to question it. It was damage Tom Riddle wrought to his mind that led him to question it. He is only wavering in his duty because he was wounded, Peter. You must realize that." He looked past Peter and caught Harry's eye. "If his mind were whole, he would know his duty and he would be happy."

"The web would have stayed buried," said Peter. "How young did you put it on him? It must have been—"

"Four," said Harry, since he thought he could speak now instead of utter a wordless scream. His head still hurt as though someone had tried to flatten it, and the magic was still curling around inside him, snarling and making little forays against the limits of his control every now and again, but he thought he could say this. "I was four."

Peter didn't look at him, but Harry could see the sudden stiffness in his shoulders and guess at the expression on his face. "Four," he said, his voice utterly flat.

Dumbledore probably thought there was nothing to be gained from speaking any more. His next attack was a hammer sent at the Protego shield. Harry had never felt such force behind any one spell. It was like a battering ram.

He reacted instinctively, the way that Snape had taught him to escape from such strong attacks in Occlumency. He grabbed Peter and rolled to the side, letting the Shield Charm splinter. The force of the hammer went through and sent rubble flying from the wall. Harry stared at it a moment.

He knew Dumbledore was in precise control of his power. He was sure the spell would have stopped before destroying him, because Dumbledore didn't want him dead.

It would have killed Peter.

Harry had had enough. He pushed at Peter, to get him further down the corridor, and then faced Dumbledore. "Haurio!" he said firmly, holding up one hand up.

A green shield spread from his palm and fingers, and then grew further, engulfing both him and Peter. This should absorb any magic Dumbledore threw at them, Harry thought. And it would give Peter time to run.

When he turned, he realized that Peter didn't have any intention of running. He was trying to get around or see around the green shield, probably so he could fling some more insults or accusations at Dumbledore.

"Get out of here, for Merlin's sake," Harry snapped, shoving at him and resisting the temptation to make a very Snapeish remark about dumb Gryffindors who wasted all their wits charging into battle.

"I want—"

"You can't tell me anything or protect me or whatever you came to do if you're dead." Harry shoved him again.

Peter paused for a moment, and then a faint smile flitted across his face. "You're right," he said. "Thank you for trusting me, Harry." A moment later, he'd changed back into a rat and was gone, scampering down the hall in a mad flight for his life. Harry spared a moment to hope that he wouldn't run across Mrs. Norris.

He turned his attention back to the shield. Dumbledore was still stronger, and was using that power in a very unrefined way, the same kind of raw force that Harry had used to break the windows and heal himself at Malfoy Manor, without channeling the magic through spells. Harry knew he could do the same thing.

He wanted to do the same thing. His rage, at least, would have been happy with him if he did.

But he remembered Hogwarts, and Remus's voice echoing in his head, saying that one had to consider the wills of others when considering whether a spell was Dark or Light. If he destroyed the school, as would happen if he let his magic fly now, how would that make him better than Voldemort?

He maintained the shield a moment longer, then dropped it and rolled out of the way. He still felt wind catch him and slam him hard into the wall, but though he was bruised, Harry knew he hadn't broken anything. He knew what a broken rib felt like, thanks to Quirrell's Crucio spell from first year. He got to his feet at once, and met Dumbledore's eyes.

They were still calm. Harry envied him for that—that he could call on his magic like that and not be incapacitated by the sheer fury it took.

"Where is Wormtail?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. As if I would tell you even if I did," he added, with a snort.

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. "Now that I know Pettigrew has been sighted on school property, I have no choice but to accede to the Ministry's request and let the Dementors guard Hogwarts. They will find Pettigrew if anyone can."

"You could at least call him Peter, like I do," said Harry, and rubbed his aching head.

"I hope that you will have occasion to avoid calling him anything in the future." Dumbledore's voice was a knife now. "That was foolish of you, my dear boy, very foolish. How could you put your life in danger protecting him like that? How could you believe his lies? He would have hurt your brother, killed him if he could. He was the one who betrayed your parents and lied to them, saying that their sons had been taken elsewhere, so that Voldemort could enter Godric's Hollow unopposed."

Harry shook his head. "I know. I know." It was all confused and tangled in his head. Even if Peter had done what he had done on Dumbledore's orders, did that mean he was any less to blame? He had still put Connor in danger.

But Dumbledore was the one who put him in danger in the first place, and when he should have been protecting him.

Harry looked up as Dumbledore sighed. "Come with me, Harry. We can check you for traces of a Confounding Charm. I fear that Pettigrew might have been charming you into believing his stories."

Harry set his teeth. "I didn't say that I believed him absolutely, not yet. But I don't trust you, either."

Dumbledore had the gall to look shocked, as though that were the last thing he would have expected. He opened his mouth to say something else, but a spell abruptly struck past him and hit the wall. From its color, Harry suspected it had been a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

He turned, staring, to see Millicent Bulstrode standing at the end of the hall, lowering her wand. She was blinking innocently at Dumbledore.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Headmaster," she said. "I didn't know that was you. Of course you wouldn't have hurt Harry. I just saw a threat standing over him, so I attacked without thinking." She trotted forward, making a variety of soothing noises that Harry wouldn't have believed could come out of her throat, just as simpering and wide-eyed as Pansy could act. She put one arm around Harry's shoulders. "Come on, Harry, let's get you to the hospital wing. You poor thing. It looked like it hurt when you hit the wall. And it looked like you had an enemy. That's too bad, but you should take comfort. You always have less of them than you think. And your enemies might have more." As she spoke the last words, she was looking straight at Dumbledore.

The Headmaster simply looked back at her. He stood where he was as Millicent escorted Harry in the direction of the hospital wing. He tolerated the pretense until they were around the corner, then tried to shake her arm off. "I'm fine, Millicent," he said.

"Of course," said Millicent. "That's why you're pale and quivering like a pudding. And of course fine people are always clutching their heads, and smell like a thunderstorm."

Harry guiltily snatched his hand from his head, then paused. "I do not smell like a thunderstorm."

"To me, you do," said Millicent. "The Bulstrode trick, you know. It smelled like the mother of all storms in there. And you need the hospital wing and bed, Harry. It's not every day that your own Headmaster tries to kill you."

"He doesn't want me dead," said Harry, and then regretted the emphasis he'd put on the word as Millicent gave him a sidelong glance. "Now what are you going to do? And give me a straight answer for once."

"What, and watch you die of shock?" Millicent mocked him, but she obliged him. "Someone's been talking to us, someone who goes by the name of Starborn. He said we should watch you, that you could be a far more useful ally to us than we had suspected." She smiled like a cat stretching. "And you are, Harry. You outfaced Dumbledore. Now our families have a real choice. They don't have to go crawling back to the insane followers trying to put the Dark Lord back together or obey Dumbledore, whom none of them trust not to compel them. They can follow you."

"I'm going to be protecting Connor," said Harry flatly. "So you'll be really following him."

Millicent patted him on the head. "Aren't you cute," she said.

Harry remained silent the rest of the way to the hospital wing, but didn't feel much better, since Millicent settled for knowing sideways smiles when she couldn't get him to talk. Madam Pomfrey got one look at him and put him to bed with a Strengthening Potion and a Calming Draught. Harry drank them in resignation and lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Do something, Ron said. Well, I fucking did something.

Now I just wish I knew what the hell it was. And I wish I could tell someone that I'm not going to be a leader or compel anyone and have them believe me.

He sighed and closed his eyes.

Chapter Nine: Gifts At Autumn's Turning

"Because," said Millicent, giving him a strange look, "the rest of us had seen the way you reacted when someone told you that you had power. There was the way you reacted when you thought that we might prefer you to your brother. There was the way that you didn't want to win that race we set you up to win last year—"

"Oh, Millicent, do be fair," said Pansy, who was sprawled on one of the divans in front of the hearth in the Slytherin common room. She opened her eyes and smiled at Harry though the mess of blonde hair covering her face. "Harry won that race on his own merits, didn't you, Harry?"

"I certainly hope so," said Harry, glancing back and forth from one girl to another. "But..." He trailed off, unable to express just what he thought.

Millicent shrugged at him. "Like it or not, you do have a tradition of refusing to live up to your potential, Harry. If we'd tried to talk to you about it, or talk you through it, we thought we'd just get another speech about your brother being the powerful one and could we all shut up now and blah blah blah." She laughed, and Harry caught a glimpse of how genuinely happy she was. The laughter was without a hint of mockery, despite what she'd just said. "We didn't know that this time you might have been willing to listen because you sensed your own magic. So we just started doing the practical thing—attending to our own needs, and waiting for you to catch up or wake up."

"Those 'needs' don't really include orbiting around me, though," said Harry, leaning back on the couch at last. He was still tired, though he'd been out of the hospital wing since early Saturday, and it was Sunday evening now. Now, at least, he knew why the Slytherins hadn't told him about the power Ron had sensed, and it was a reason he believed. "There's no reason that you have to choose me as leader, or whatever other insane plan you had in mind."

Millicent shrugged. "Your magic," she said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

Harry shook his head. "Voldemort and Dumbledore have more than raw magical power, you know that. You'd be safer with one of them, if you really wanted protection from the other one." It struck him as somewhat ludicrous that he was encouraging some of his Housemates to follow the Dark Lord, but pureblood politics often ended up being like this, the same way that Lucius had been proud last year when his son had out-danced him.

"Of course we know that," said Millicent. "And we also know that they have established principles that are going to wreck and destroy the way we are."

Harry peered at her. "I thought Voldemort was all about defending pureblood ideals."

"Pureblood ideals aren't about killing Muggles," said Pansy. "They're about staying away from them, maybe. But—listen, Harry, my mother was a Death Eater. You must know that by now." She sat up and stared at him. "And you're helping her anyway."

Harry glanced away. "And don't think I haven't asked myself why I'm doing it," he muttered. How could he brew the Wolfsbane Potion for a woman who had set the blood of several witches and wizards boiling until it scalded them alive from the inside? He didn't know, so he kept his eyes on his hands when he made the Potion, and not on the mirror that Snape kept in his office for the purpose of preparing some of the more obscure brews.

"You're doing it," said Pansy. "That's the important thing. And you didn't demand some kind of sacrifice from my mother."

"I demanded some things from her," said Harry, glaring at her.

"I know," said Pansy patiently. "But they weren't sacrifices. They were an equal bargain. That's the difference, Harry. Dumbledore would sacrifice us, or want to, if we went to him. That's what he has a habit of doing." Her eyes flashed viciously. "And the Dark Lord asks for more than sacrifices. By the time he's done, there's no one left to give anything more."

"Doesn't that make it sound as though Dumbledore is the one you should be asking for help, then?" Harry pointed out.

Pansy gave him a flat stare. "No," she said.

Harry shook his head. "I can't help you," he said. "Not much. I'm thirteen. I'm still not as strong as Dumbledore. I'm going to follow and serve my brother. My magic is making everyone uneasy right now, not content."

"And do you know why?" Millicent asked, her hand plucking at a blanket someone had slung along the back of her chair.

Harry shook his head.

"Because it appeared," said Millicent. "Or so it seems. Powerful wizards don't just walk out of the broom closet every day, you know—oh, sorry, here I am, rather got lost for a while."

Harry frowned. She was mocking him again. "And so?"

"So they're rushing around like a Pegasus with a gadfly up its arse," said Millicent bluntly, "trying to figure out what to do. And sooner or later they're going to calm down, and then they're going to start asking questions. And one of those questions is going to be why they couldn't sense your magic before, why it burst out at full strength instead of building slowly for years. If it had just built naturally, if everyone knew you were powerful over time instead of suddenly, then they wouldn't panic. They'd just acknowledge that sooner or later they'd have to deal with you, and go about their lives. But this—" She shook her head. "Harry, this doesn't happen. It won't be long before you hear people whispering unnatural, and wondering if this is a side effect of your possession from last year, and all kinds of other things."

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with one hand. Another thing to thank Dumbledore for, I suppose. "Ron suggested that I make some kind of announcement to the wizarding world,

telling them I don't plan to do anything evil, and outlining what I do plan to do," he said. "Would that work?"

"Trust a Gryffindor to come up with that kind of plan," said Pansy. "Of course it wouldn't work. For one thing, it'd make you seem weak, as if you were conceding to the Ministry, when you don't need to. For another, why should you have to declare all your principles and allegiances right now? Tell them to go talk to your parents, and go right on living. And brewing my mother's Wolfsbane Potion," she added.

"But I thought that I had to do something," said Harry. "Otherwise, the Ministry will start trying to take me away from my parents, and—"

"Oh, they'll make noises about it, sure," said Millicent, waving one hand. "But they can't do anything unless they find out that your parents actually abused you." She stared at him. "And they'd probably prefer to leave you right where you are. They don't want to split apart the family of the Boy-Who-Lived, after all."

Harry nodded. He'd seen the headlines in the Prophet lately, the ones that swirled around Connor's every minor doing as if it were proof that he was about to drop dead or save the world. There had been a front-page article on the fact that Connor had argued with Ron the other day. "Then all that I need to do is hide—"

He cut himself off abruptly. He sometimes forgot, in the sheer camaraderie of speaking Slytherin to Slytherin, that only Draco and Snape knew any details about his home life.

"Hide what?" Millicent asked. "Your magic? I don't think you can, not now."

Harry shook his head and glanced away from her too-sharp eyes. "Nothing."

"So long as the 'nothing' doesn't interfere with anything you need to do," said Pansy, standing up and yawning. "I'm going to bed."

Harry nodded to her and watched her go to the third-year girls' dorm, then turned to find Millicent still watching him.

"Draco's not the only Slytherin who can watch, you know," she said. "And I don't need strange books from my mother to help me notice things. I notice things, Harry. The way you forced down so many emotions last year. That almost slavish devotion you have to your brother. How you immediately leaped to thinking about consequences for your power, instead of just glorying in the fact that you have it. How you went home with the Malfoys last summer, and your parents didn't object."

"I know you notice things, Millicent," said Harry, yawning himself. "But I'm not going to tell you anything."

"I'll make you a bargain," said Millicent. "One piece of information from you, and in return I'll teach you a spell that will make sure Dumbledore can never try the trick he pulled last night."

Harry eyed her warily. "Why would you know a spell like that?"

Millicent shrugged. "My mother works with the goblins at Gringotts. She knows most of the spells they use to determine which coins are real and which are false." She smiled abruptly. "You wouldn't believe how many wizards and witches think they're the first to have the brilliant idea of counterfeiting Galleons."

Harry closed his eyes. A spell like that would presumably help with the illusion that Dumbledore had been under.

He had thought of a way to deal with Dumbledore on his own, but it wouldn't cover every instance, and it certainly wouldn't cover Dumbledore putting a glamour on someone else and sending him after Harry.

"All right," he said, opening his eyes. "I think about consequences for my power because that's the way I was raised, studying history and magic from the youngest age possible. I've read about the First War, and I've seen what happens when wizards don't watch out and just loose their power in any random direction they want to. And since I've

been here, I've had the example of Dumbledore's magic to remind me every day of that."

He wondered if Millicent would demand more, but she just nodded at him and held out her wand. "The spell is *Aspectus Lyncis*," she said, "the Lynx Sight spell." She showed him the wand passes he had to perform, and intoned it carefully, her voice stressing the second syllable of the first word and the first syllable of the second. Harry nodded, and then performed it himself, being careful to use his wand. He was still trying to get his magic used to using that first, instead of flying all over the place.

He blinked when several wards flickered into sight, positioned around the Slytherin common room. All of them had the trace of Dumbledore's power around them. Harry frowned and decided that he would study them later as a jaw-cracking yawn nearly sent him from the couch.

"Good night, Harry," said Millicent, standing up with a faint smile. "I'll see you tomorrow. And remember—not everyone who wants to follow you or who's interested in you is only doing it because of power."

Harry just blinked at her as she went up to the girls' dorm, and then went to his own room. Vince, Blaise, and Greg were already asleep. Draco was lying on his back, reading a book by the look of the Lumos spell through the curtains, but he didn't respond when Harry softly called out to him.

Harry shook his head and put his pyjamas on. If he wants to ignore me, that's just fine. I can ignore him right back.

But, he admitted as he crawled into his own bed and drew the curtains closed, it did hurt.

Harry took a deep breath and added the final drop of sphinx blood. The potion stirred briefly, as though it would reach up out of its cauldron and bite him, and then fell back. It began to steam at once. Harry stepped back and looked at Snape.

Snape nodded, once. Harry let the breath out. One Wolfsbane Potion, correctly brewed.

"I'm going to take this to Pansy," said Harry quietly, as he began fetching vials and dipping them into the cauldron. "She'll want to owl her mother at once, I think—"

Snape shook his head. "The Red Death is waiting for you at the edge of the Forbidden Forest," he said calmly, as he turned back to the cauldron he was brewing for Remus. "She owled me this morning and told me so."

Harry stared at his back for a moment, blinking, then said, "Why did she tell you that?"

Snape spoke without looking at him. "It seems that she wanted to make peace with me, once she knew that you would be brewing the potion under my direction." He had a smile in his voice. Harry knew from the sound that it was a nasty smile. "So easy, after all, to settle a long-time grudge with a little poison in the wrong place. And this is a complicated potion, very easy to get wrong."

Harry nodded uneasily. "And she knew that this would be the day I finished the potion?"

"She apparently has people watching you," said Snape blandly, as he added another pinch of demiguise hair to his own potion and stirred it once. "I can't imagine why."

Harry cursed under his breath and continued filling and corking vials. He thought longingly of Connor's Invisibility Cloak, then shook his head. Connor was making use of it right now, sneaking outside the walls to meet Sirius in the old Shrieking Shack. Besides, he didn't think his brother would want him using the cloak to go and meet a former Death Eater specializing in blood curses.

"Harry."

Harry glanced up, startled, to find Snape watching him. He had a faint smile on his face. It could have come from anything.

"Well done," said Snape.

It took Harry a moment to realize why that sounded so familiar to him. Snape had told him the same thing at the end of first year, when he had told the story of fighting Voldemort to him under Veritaserum.

Harry shook his head, unwilling to visit the bitterness that still remained in him about that incident, and slipped out the door, holding the corked vials of potion close.

Luckily, no one was there to see him as he slipped up the dungeon stairs and across the entrance hall, though he did pause briefly to let Percy Weasley go by. The boy was hurrying along with his head bowed, muttering to himself. Harry hesitated when he heard him saying, "But how could I do anything that would hurt my family?" but decided it was none of his business. He would hardly want Percy sticking his nose into Harry's private wonderings about Connor, after all.

He cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself as he emerged from the school. It was a pleasant evening, the wind brisk but not cold, the leaves on the trees that edged the Forbidden Forest just beginning to turn. Harry briefly turned his head in the direction of the Whomping Willow that hid the Shrieking Shack, and wished that he could be there with his brother, helping him train.

Sirius does that well enough, he reminded himself, as he skirted Hagrid's hut and headed deeper into the trees. And you'd only make him uncomfortable anyway, since you're so uncomfortable yourself around compulsion magic.

That was another thing he would have to train himself out of, Harry reflected as he reached the edge of the Forest and began to scan carefully for Mrs. Parkinson. Connor was his beloved brother. No rift must ever come between them, either in reality or in appearance. Harry had been through that, and he didn't want it to happen again, but it would if Harry insisted on being uncomfortable around compulsion magic. He didn't have to be. Dumbledore had used it harmfully, but Dumbledore was not his twin. Harry was sure that Connor could do much more productive things with it.

He caught a glimpse of a dark cloak beneath one tree edged with leaves like fire, and halted. While he watched, the cloak moved again, and he caught a flash of pale hair he was sure was Hawthorn Parkinson's.

He dispelled the Charm, and heard the woman's soft exclamation before she stifled it. Then she came forward and held out her hand wordlessly, and Harry placed the vials of the Wolfsbane Potion into her palm.

Hawthorn studied him, her hazel eyes quick and bright. She looked better than the last time Harry had seen her, though he supposed that might be because it was further from the full moon. She still appeared tired, but there was a resolve, a fire, in her that Harry had seen in Pansy when her blood was up.

"Thank you," said Hawthorn at last, and then shook her head. "I wish I had something else to say. Thank you is an inadequate word for what you have done for me. The transformation was not so painful as the madness that followed, in which I lost every trace of the witch I am. I would pay much not to have to suffer it again."

"What you promised me before is all I require," said Harry fiercely. "That you stay away from Fenrir Greyback and his attempts to raise the Dark Lord, or whatever it is that he's doing."

Hawthorn nodded once. "That is all you require, but it is not enough to settle my sense of a debt," she said. "Have you heard of Starborn?"

Harry blinked. "Millicent mentioned him. She said that he's been telling you to watch me."

Hawthorn smiled. It was a strange smile. Harry wondered about it. "Indeed," she murmured. "He has had an opportunity to observe you closely, and he has liked what he had seen." She reached under her cloak, and Harry tensed, his magic rising in readiness around him, but instead of her wand, she tugged out a book, which she held towards Harry. Harry accepted it and tilted it towards the moonlight.

He caught his breath. Bindings of Magic, the title said, a book that Merlin himself was supposed to have written. He looked up at Hawthorn in wonder. "I thought this was destroyed."

Hawthorn shrugged. "Well, it is hardly an original; it is a copy of a copy, and there may be some errors in it. But, errors or not, there are many things in there that most modern wizards believe about compulsion magic, webs, and other forms of binding."

Harry frowned at her at the mention of webs, and Hawthorn winked. "As I said," she murmured, "Starborn has had the opportunity to observe you very closely." She tilted her head and laid her fingers over her lips. "And he is no friend of Dumbledore's," she added softly.

Harry took a deep breath and looked back at the book in his hands. For all that he knew Hawthorn must have ulterior motives for giving it to him, this was a priceless gift, since he knew it spoke of the many ancient kinds of magical bindings that might tie wizards together, such as life debts and sacrifices of love, and included the basis of more modern kinds of magic. It might contain the information that he needed to free himself completely from the phoenix web; in fact, if any single book in the world did, this one would.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I don't think you only did this to repay the debt, but thank you."

Hawthorn smiled faintly at him. "You are right," she said. "Pansy has been writing to me, and Starborn has been writing to me, and there is a crystal phoenix in my home which sings when great power comes into the world. It has sung since the end of last spring. It is a relief to meet you at last." She bowed her head slightly. "At the same time, you might not be the kind of leader we need. Raw power proves nothing."

"What about a lack of taste for leadership?"

Hawthorn smiled again, more fully this time. "So that part was true," she said. "Well, Starborn has written me about that, too. I do not believe you are the kind of wizard who would grasp at enslaving others."

"Tell that to the Ministry," muttered Harry, tucking Bindings of Magic into a pocket of his robes.

Hawthorn's smile widened still further. "When you do what you must for love and duty," she said, "as I believe you will, they will have no choice but to see it."

She turned and slipped back into the Forbidden Forest before Harry had the chance to ask her any more. He sighed, frowned at nothing, and slipped away himself, back to the castle.

The book rode in his pocket, calling his thoughts.

She was wrong. This book doesn't repay her debt. It makes me owe her a greater one.

"I have to know," said Millicent, as they sat at breakfast on the first day of autumn. Harry jumped a bit; he'd been thinking more about what he read in Bindings of Magic the night before than he was about the people around him. He glanced at her, only to find her motioning to the staff table. "What did you do to Dumbledore, that he hardly dares to look at you any more?"

Harry grinned and glanced in Dumbledore's direction. The Headmaster was keeping his eyes strictly on his food.

"A variation on a mirror spell," said Harry happily. "When he looks at me and thinks about casting spells on me, the spells start affecting him instead. If he was thinking about putting me in a full body-bind, for example, he would start feeling his legs go paralyzed." He happily bit into a pumpkin pasty.

He looked up to find Pansy and Millicent exchanging glances. "What?" he asked.

"That shouldn't be possible," said Pansy frankly. "A shield that bounces spells when they're active, sure. But not when he's just thinking about them."

"Well, it's not when he's just thinking about them, I told you," said Harry, talking through his pasty. He ignored the girls' looks of disgust. It was part of his cunning campaign to discourage them from thinking of him as a leader. He could be subtly Slytherin, too. Or maybe he was just hungry. I wonder if part of being Slytherin is learning to lie to yourself, too. "It's when he looks at me and thinks about them. The sight aspect is important."

"It's still incredible," said Millicent. "Not many students can invent spells like that, you know."

"It's a variation on the mirror spells," Harry insisted. "I didn't make it up." Perhaps talking with his mouth full wasn't enough to discourage them. He wondered if talking willingly to Gryffindors other than his brother and Neville would.

"Yes, but—"

A sudden ruffle of wings announced the arrival Harry had been waiting for—though he had half-wondered if Lucius had given up, now. No, he thought, as he tilted his head back and watched the great horned owl, Julius, sweeping once around the Great Hall before he descended on the Slytherin table.

Harry reached out, curious, to take the bundle from Julius's leg. There were two possible gifts that Lucius could choose for this autumnal equinox gift, since it was the last one in the year-cycle he'd chosen. The next, Yuletide gift would mark a year since he had been truce-dancing with Harry. This one was the point where he had to choose to take the truce down one of two paths: the continuation to a true pact, or the graceful backing-out, both of which would take another year. Harry was almost certain he would back out, but even then, the gift this time would be both beautiful and useful.

His breath caught when the bundle opened and a small mirror fell out. He picked it up with trembling hands, and tilted it back and forth. As he suspected, it showed not his face, but the view from a similar mirror in Malfoy Manor, which bent and skewed as he turned his own glass. When he concentrated, he could push his gaze and attention through that mirror, and out from the room it hung in, and conjure a

floating, present-time vision of any corridors and rooms in Malfoy Manor.

Lucius had granted Harry license to see into his home, the private sanctum of his family. More than that, he could look at any time he wanted, and see whether plots against him were taking place.

Lucius intended to continue the truce dance.

Harry managed to breathe again, with a massive effort, and picked up the note that had come with the mirror.

Mr. Potter:

In light of the regard I bear you, on this first day of autumn, may you step past the barriers between us that are falling like leaves.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry put the mirror down gently on the table. He swallowed once. He knew what the proper answer would be: a mirror that allowed Lucius to see into his own home.

Into Godric's Hollow.

If he chose to continue this dance. Harry would have to think about that carefully. His relationship with Narcissa and Draco—even with Draco as distant and strange as he was now—was far different than Lucius's relationship with his parents and Connor.

"That's a princely gift," said Pansy, shattering the awe.

"I know," said Harry simply, and tucked the mirror into a pocket. He watched as Julius took wing again and flew through the window.

He glanced down the table, but Draco had his nose buried in one of his mother's books again, the one with the Guile serpent on the front, and was ignoring Harry. Harry smothered his flicker of irritation. You have no right to be irritated with him. You didn't treat him very well when you had his attention.

He stood, ready to make his way to the first class of the day, History of Magic. He was looking forward to the chance to sleep while Binns droned his way through history Harry already knew by heart. He'd had the dream of the two dark figures last night—one screaming in a cramped space, one writhing on a bed and whimpering—for the first time in a long time. He'd lain awake after that, tense, waiting for an attack from Tom Riddle before he finally figured out it wasn't coming and fell asleep again. By then it'd been almost dawn, and Blaise had had to threaten to dump cold water on him to get him out of bed.

He was just about to leave the hall when he heard a loud cry and a sound of shattering glass. Eyes wide, he turned back to see Snape on his back on the Hufflepuff table, one hand on his wand.

Clutching his throat, and making it impossible for him to get his wand up and cast a spell, was Sirius.

He was snarling, yelling words that Harry couldn't make out, so choked as they were with spittle and rage. Snape replied in a much clearer voice, despite the grip on his throat. "Have you lost your mind, Black? That never happened!"

"Yes, it did," said Sirius, more clearly this time, "and you are going to apologize." He abruptly transformed, and now it was a huge black dog with its teeth near Snape's throat. There was a long moment of trembling tension, and Harry knew Sirius would bite. He might well tear Snape's throat out.

He started to call on his magic, but Snape must have managed a nonverbal, wandless curse. Padfoot abruptly went flying backwards, smashing into the wall behind the Gryffindor table and tumbling down it. Connor was on his feet, face red with fury and wand out and aimed at Snape.

"Enough."

Harry felt the wave of compulsion that attacked the Great Hall, similar to the time last year when Dumbledore had calmed the other students after Harry admitted to being a Parselmouth. He felt it worming into

his mind, and closed his eyes. He didn't have Sylarana to root Dumbledore out this time, but he knew the Headmaster was there, which was an advantage he hadn't had last year, and he had his Occlumency shields and his utter hatred of the Headmaster to sustain him.

I may not be able to face you on the battlefield yet, he thought. Connor might still need any protection you can give him, and it isn't time to make you answer for endangering him yet. But it will be.

He threw off the compulsion a moment later, and he opened his eyes to see Snape looking similarly disgruntled. But everyone else was calm—

Until Sirius, who had transformed back into a man, began to sob.

Harry stared at his godfather. He looked like a trembling, broken shell, as though he and not Peter was the one who had gone to Azkaban for twelve years. He hid his face from everyone else and wept as though his heart was breaking. Connor, visibly shocked, started to step towards him.

“Severus, Sirius,” said Dumbledore, his voice implacable, “please follow me to my office at once.” He nodded at the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. “I am sorry to deprive the third-years of their teacher for Potions class, but it should be for only one morning.” He swept out the door.

Snape followed a moment later. Sirius picked himself up and stumbled, sobbing, along behind.

Harry stood frozen. He wanted to go after them, to figure out what the hell had happened, but Millicent was tugging on his arm.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Professor Snape will tell you later.”

Harry had to admit that was probably true, and anyway, he didn't think he could be in the same small room with Dumbledore safely right now. He forced his feet to move, to carry him out of the Great Hall.

He might have gone to Connor, too, but a whole horde of Gryffindors had descended on him. He had to trust that his brother would be all right.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed, carefully dealing with the anger, and the unexpected source of the anger.

I'm furious with him. I'm furious with Sirius for assaulting Snape.

Shouldn't it really be the other way around?

He wondered, gloomily, what new and disturbing discoveries about himself this portended.

Chapter Ten: Memories, Such Haunting Memories

Snape had been passing the Hufflepuff table, on his way to the dungeons to teach his morning Potions class, when Black had assaulted him.

And that is what it was, he reminded himself, subtly shifting his robe and wincing at the cuts and scores and scratches that ran down his back under the cloth. He'd heard cups shatter, and probably a few plates. Black was going to pay for wounding him in that manner, and Dumbledore was going to pay for hurrying him out of the Great Hall in such an undignified manner that Snape had had no chance to subtly heal himself.

For now, he kept his glare on Dumbledore's back and his stride swift and even. He would leave the wounds for evidence, if he needed them, of how unstable Black had gone.

Not that it matters, he thought briefly, his glance darting back to scour the man who followed them. I know I will only hear some excuse for the instability, and some half-hearted apology, and a scolding for not being more tolerant, and that will be the end of it. Black is Dumbledore's Golden Boy, has been ever since that damned Hat touched his head and shouted him for Gryffindor. Why should things have changed?

Yet he had dared to hope that things had changed, since he had contacted Black over the summer and asked him to formally dissolve the bet they'd made over Harry last year, since they had both acted like school-children. Black, sober and earnest—

For once.

--had accepted immediately, apologized, and said that he would tell Harry about the bet ending. When the boy came back to Hogwarts and made no mention of it, Snape had assumed that Black had kept his word.

Now, he wondered.

Is that why he said what he did? Accused me of trying to murder his godson?

Frowning, shaking his head, Snape hardly noticed when they arrived at Dumbledore's gargoyle, and didn't remember the password the Headmaster called to let them past it. Of course, he thought, that hardly mattered. He was not in the habit of visiting Dumbledore any more.

He wondered if the Headmaster had really noticed it, or what it meant. You are a fool if you do not, Albus. The purebloods are spinning around a new star. They don't know what he means to do now, but that may not matter, not if they convince themselves that he could do something. You intended to use his brother as a figurehead, Albus. Instead, you have someone distinctly different on your hands, someone close to growing into a true leader.

But he cleared his mind of that as they arrived in the Headmaster's office and Dumbledore turned around with that gentle smile Snape had grown to know and loathe. "Sirius, Severus," he said. "Please take a seat."

It was not a request, for all that he made it sound like one, and Snape felt the iron edge of the same compulsion that had attacked the Great Hall, pressing him towards one of the chairs. He shook it off and sat down on his own. Black shuffled towards his and half-collapsed into it, looking like an old man.

"Now, Sirius," said Dumbledore, sitting down behind his desk and turning an anxious, fond glance on Black, "tell me what happened."

"I don't remember," Black whispered.

Oh, I do not believe that, Snape thought, raising an eyebrow.

Neither did Dumbledore, apparently. "Sirius," he said, as though scolding a child.

Black broke again, and began to weep. Snape curled his lip and looked away. He had seen grown pureblood wizards weep, but only

under the influence of the Cruciatus and similar curses. Even if Black had realized the incredible worthlessness of his continued existence and was going to beg the Headmaster to end it all for him, he could have shown a little more dignity.

At last, Black drew himself together, and whispered, “I—I could see it all so clearly. I remembered Snivellus trying to kill Harry last year.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. He said he would try to put aside that stupid nickname. Anger stirred in him, against Black and against himself, for being so stupid as to believe that anything Black said was true. I see the way things stand now. You are my enemy, Black, and I see no value in trying to keep peace with you, even for Harry's sake. I would take pleasure in removing him from you now. If you died, I would dance on your grave.

The depth of his hatred was sustaining, comforting. This was the same man who had tried to send him to his death when they were both sixteen, and not in the name of Dumbledore's war with the Dark Lord. Snape wondered that Dumbledore would even try to protect someone so weak, so flawed by his grudges that he could not see past them. He certainly could not use him in his endless war, so what was the point?

He realized it again as he watched Dumbledore lean forward across his desk, gently coaxing Black to speak. He is a pureblood wizard from a Dark line, who was placed in the House that Dumbledore thinks is the House of Light. Black is his little pet redemption project. Of course he would try to spare him anything he could, and not hold him to those standards of conduct that any other reasonable adult wizard would be expected to obey.

“Tell me about Severus trying to kill Harry,” Dumbledore whispered. “Come now, Sirius, you can do it.”

Snape rolled his eyes, but sat still.

“He was standing over him with his wand,” Black whispered, in between the sobs. “He said that he really served the Dark Lord, and that he was going to send Harry's soul to join the soul of his dead

master. Then he fired a Killing Curse at him, but it rebounded, just the way that it rebounded from—from his brother.” Black huddled into himself and covered his face with his hands.

Dumbledore turned to look at him. Snape wanted to rage at the doubt on his face.

How dare you look at me that way, Albus, after everything I have done for you? A year of spying, a year of giving up people who believed in the same things I once had, a year of walking in constant fear of discovery, a year of committing murder and torture on your commands? Don’t you owe me more than that?

Probably last year, Dumbledore would have felt he did, Snape realized abruptly. But since Snape had confronted him over what he had done to Harry, their relationship had been strained to the breaking point. He no longer trusted Dumbledore not to hurt a child. Perhaps the Headmaster did not trust him in exactly the same way.

He kept his voice a lazy drawl, his eyes half-shuttered. “Do you really believe, Albus, that if I had been hit by a deflected Killing Curse, that I would be here now? Such a spell destroyed the Dark Lord, who was a much more powerful wizard than I am. And what was my motive for trying to kill Harry Potter? Do tell me that.”

“I told you,” said Black, jerking his head up. His face was caught in a snarl, his features twisted into something barely human. “You’re a Death Eater, Snivellus. You were trying to kill Harry so that you could bring your master back.”

“From the story you told, it sounds like this imaginary wizard you saw was trying to take vengeance for the Dark Lord instead.” Snape sneered.

Black passed a hand over his face. His eyes had such heavy dark circles under them that Snape wondered, in a detached way, when he had last slept. “I—that’s what I meant. That’s right.”

“It is not right,” said Snape, wondering that anyone could believe this idiocy. “Headmaster, with your permission, I would like to leave this

room. I cannot believe these ridiculous accusations. I cannot believe that I should be subjected to them.”

“This was grave enough for Sirius to attack you in the Great Hall, in front of the students, Severus,” Dumbledore said, his eyes unsmiling. “You will stay.” He turned and looked at Sirius again. “If this happened last year, Sirius, why didn’t you attack him then? Or come and report the incident to me?”

Black’s face turned dead white.

Oh, yes, do tell him, Snape thought, folding his arms across his chest and staring back at him. Do tell him that. I must admit, I am curious to learn how this imaginary version of me got away as well.

“I—it was wiped out of my mind the next day,” Black whispered. “They made me forget. Someone wanted me to forget.”

Dumbledore sighed. “And now the Memory Charm has snapped? That would account for your behavior, Sirius, but you still should have come to me first, instead of attacking Severus.”

Black seized on the explanation fervently. “Yes, yes, the Obliviate broke,” he said, his head bobbing up and down on his neck like a puppet’s. “And now the memories are flooding me, and I’m sorry, Albus, but it was just too much to take. They flooded me all at once, and I had to try to kill him for what he’d done to Harry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should have come to you first, but I didn’t think.” Tears were leaking down his face again.

What a plainly ridiculous story, Snape thought. I would have noticed last year if Black was under a Memory Charm of any kind, or Dumbledore would have. He had to admit, he hadn’t noticed that that incredible fool Lockhart had used any Memory Charms, but he had used few if any while inside the school itself.

“Since I did not try to kill Harry, Black,” he said, “I am curious as to what your Obliviator would have wanted you to forget.”

Black turned towards him and gave a very dog-like snap of his teeth. Snape curled his lip. He had always found it fitting that Black's Animagus form was a dog, since he had learned of it. Snape himself had always believed that dogs were dirty creatures, shedding and barking and smelling like wet hair when they came in out of the rain.

"How do I know that you didn't try to kill Harry?" the fool asked belligerently. "That's what the memory says."

"But you are lying," said Snape, looking directly into Black's glare and adding a touch of Legilimency to his gaze, trying to seek out the truth in his mind. It was such a feeble lie, thought it would succeed because Dumbledore would support him in it. Snape was curious to see what Black was hiding instead.

He found absolute, howling chaos. Most wizards organized their mind in some way, as a park or a forest or a vast underground cavern. This was a raging storm, flickering lightning revealing memories that Snape barely had time to glimpse before darkness took them again, and wind that tossed him from side to side and made the normal gentle swimming motion of a Legilimens impossible.

He tore himself away and looked down at the chair, his hands clenching on the fabric. He breathed out, carefully. He did not think Black was insane, but he was very close to it. He is dangerous. I must keep him away from Harry at all costs.

"I am not lying," Black was saying. If he had felt Snape touching his mind, he didn't seem inclined to comment on it, and neither did Dumbledore. "That's what the memory says."

Snape looked up to see Dumbledore watching them across the desk. His eyes were sober, but he wasn't interfering.

He will let Black say such ridiculous things? Then I have free rein with the truth.

"I wonder what memories you've put aside, Black, to put this false one in its place?" he asked, turning his attention back to his old enemy. "Memories of your godson being abused, perhaps? Memories

of him turned into nothing more than a tool for his brother, memories of his mind and his magic bound and nearly shattered because someone feared his power—"He took care not to look at Dumbledore.

"That's not true!" Black was yelling, near the top of his lungs. "It's Connor who has the power, not Harry, and Harry was never abused!"

"Tell me, then," said Snape, "what you call being made to study advanced magic when you are a child. Tell me what you call casting curses on yourself to train yourself into weathering physical pain. Tell me what you call knowing that you will die in war protecting your brother, or stand at his shoulder wrapped in shadows if you survive. I saw all this and more in Harry's mind last year, Black. And I saw how none of the adults who should have been his guardians and his protectors were helping him. I saw—"

"That is enough, Severus."

Another flowing wave of compulsion, as in the Great Hall, and Snape found his mouth clamped shut. He blinked and subsided. The spell wore off immediately, and then Dumbledore was leaning forward across his desk, his eyes on fire with anger.

"You will not repeat such lies outside this office," he said.

"They are not lies, Albus," Snape snarled back. "You know they are not. You know what you did. You know whom you sacrificed."

"You should have thought of that," said Dumbledore, his eyes stern, "before you made another such sacrifice necessary."

Snape had nothing to say to that. He swallowed, and felt a cold black dread building in his stomach.

"I know that you have spent long hours alone with Harry," Dumbledore went on. "Perhaps you are only teaching him advanced Potions and spells. Perhaps not. Perhaps you truly do mean to harm him for the sake of the man who was once your master."

"You know the truth," said Snape again. There was a cold hollowness in the middle of him, he realized in wonder. He had not thought that Dumbledore would go this far. He had not thought that the man really was capable of such enormities.

"I know many truths," Dumbledore replied. "And one of them is that you will not supervise any more of Harry's detentions, nor spend any more time alone with him after class hours."

"Under penalty...?" Snape asked. Because there had to be a threat, of course. The Headmaster would not expect him to just give up and slink away into a corner without being bested in some form or fashion.

"Under penalty of Sirius's memory being spread to the entire school," said Dumbledore, and his voice was heavy. "Who do you think they will believe, Severus? A former Death Eater, only spared from Azkaban by the good grace of the Headmaster of Hogwarts? Or a hero of the First War with Voldemort, a former Auror, and the godfather of the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Snape had to close his eyes, so dizzy with rage and outrage was he. "You will lose yourself a Potions teacher if you do this," he said.

"Only if you are stupid and stubborn, Severus." Dumbledore sounded as though he were smiling. "And I know that you are not. That is more the province of Gryffindors." Snape opened his eyes to see him giving Black a fond look.

Caught. Trapped.

How could he let himself be stripped away as support for Harry?

On the other hand, he could do nothing for Harry if he was in Azkaban. And he knew about the panic creeping slowly through the Ministry, filtering into Hogwarts and touching the students of his House. It awaited only a spark to light the tinder. Finding out that a pardoned Death Eater had tried to kill a student, and with that student being who he was, would ignite it.

Snape thought of the others that conflagration would reach out to touch—the pureblood families, the former Slytherins who would suddenly come under intense suspicions for nothing they had done, the wizards with unusual talents who made others nervous. Minerva herself could be under suspicion in such a climate, for all that she was a Gryffindor and a hero of the First War, for nothing more unusual than being an Animagus. The wizarding world was once more in the mood to fear and hate what it did not understand.

And Harry would certainly be on that list. His power and his Parseltongue talent would make him a likely target.

If he cared about protecting him, Snape could not do that to him.

"I yield," he said, his voice sounding hollow even to himself. "I promise that I will not speak such truths outside this office."

"Lies, Severus," Dumbledore reprimanded him gently. "They are not true."

It would have been a relief to be Black in that moment, Snape thought, or any other impulsive, dunderheaded Gryffindor. It would have been a relief to have shouted, to storm at the Headmaster and call him a bastard, to pull his wand and hex everyone in sight.

But he was a Slytherin. And Slytherins retreated when they had to, and waited for the best moment to strike, when the enormous heel of a more powerful enemy was not poised to crush them.

"Very well," he said, with what he knew was bad grace. "Lies, then."

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes twinkling again. "Now, Severus, please return to your Potions class. I have matters to speak of with Sirius."

Black, Snape noted as he stood, was looking hopeful again. Of course, why should he not? He had always been Dumbledore's Golden Boy. If trying to slaughter another student in school was not enough to get him in trouble, why should attacking another teacher in the Great Hall be?

There are times I wish I had died on Lupin's fangs, Snape thought, as he took the moving staircase back down, if only because an enraged werewolf would bring me to a cleaner end than Albus seems intent on doing.

The idea hit him so hard that he nearly stumbled.

An enraged werewolf...

He used all the skills he had learned as a spy to keep himself from showing emotion on his face or in his body, just in case Dumbledore was watching him through the spells Snape knew he had positioned in this staircase. He reached the bottom and strode briskly in the direction of his Potions class. He would teach them, and he would go about the other ordinary efforts of his day, and at the end of it, he would go and speak to Remus Lupin.

"Lupin," said Snape coolly, when his knock on the werewolf's door that evening produced said werewolf.

"Severus," said Lupin, blinking at him. He always had assumed he had permission to use Snape's first name, Snape thought as he pushed past him, and scolding him for it had always been tiring. Besides, now it would probably work to his advantage. Lupin considered them on friendlier terms than Snape himself did.

"Remus," he said, turning around as Lupin shut the door, and noticing the brief flicker of surprise in the amber eyes. "I need your help."

"I assumed you were here to bring me the Wolfsbane Potion," said Lupin, frowning at him. "For what other reason do you visit?"

Snape ground his teeth. Gryffindors. Always interested in the most inane things. "For a reason that concerns us both, this time," he said sharply. "Harry."

Lupin's eyes widened, and he rubbed the back of his neck, moving to take a seat behind his desk. It was an old and comfortable-looking piece of furniture, Snape noticed. In fact, most everything in the room looked comfortable, from the books with battered spines on the

shelves to the half-stuffed chairs that flowed around the desk in a half-circle. “What about him? I trust that he hasn’t been troubling you. I know that last year he still wanted rather badly to go to Gryffindor, but I have told him that Slytherin House isn’t all that bad.”

How gracious of you, Snape almost said. He let it go. There were more important things at stake. “Tell me,” he said, “was there ever a point this year at which you seemed to lose a few days’ time?”

Lupin froze. Then he glanced hastily aside. Trying to keep me from reading his mind, Snape thought, and his eyes narrowed. So he does suspect. Why hasn’t he done anything about it?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Lupin, his voice light and neutral. “Now, Severus, if you will excuse me, I really ought to get this marking done. I’m frightfully late handing these essays back to my students as it is.” He picked up the stack of scrolls near the edge of his desk.

“You suspect,” Snape whispered. “Why haven’t you come to me? There are ways to break a Memory Charm, you know that, and I would not have thought you one to submit tamely to an Obliviate, however gentle your friends may claim you to be.”

Lupin’s hands tightened, and he looked up. “Albus told me the truth when I asked,” he said.

Thrown, Snape only stared at him.

“He told me that the memories he took from me concerned Sirius,” said Lupin, and closed his eyes as if in pain. “I—sometimes I get angry at him for things he can’t help, things that are over and done and in the past now. Sometimes I get angry at him for just being who he is. And that is not something friends should do. I always come back and apologize to him later, but this time I went further. This time I did something that hurt him so badly that Albus had no choice but to take the memories from me, so that I wouldn’t go on hurting him.”

Snape wanted to swear. Black, Black, always Black! Who else has Albus sacrificed to protect him?

With an enormous effort, he held in his temper. "Albus lied to you," he said as coolly as he could. "The stolen memories concern Harry, not Sirius."

"Harry?" Lupin frowned. "But why would he want to take away memories concerning Harry? I've always been happy with Harry. He's never done anything that made me angry."

"Not what he has done," said Snape, watching closely, "but what he has had done to him."

Lupin just went on frowning at him.

Snape shook his head. "You would not believe evil of your friends if it paraded around in front of you naked, would you?" he asked.

Lupin said, slowly, enunciating each word, "We've all made choices that we're not proud of. But I don't think any of those choices has ever—" He broke off abruptly and swallowed. Then he said, in a voice that Snape didn't understand, the voice of someone pleading for forgiveness, "I know that Harry was in danger that Halloween night when You-Know-Who attacked Godric's Hollow, but not since then. His parents would not endanger him. Sirius loves him. Tell me they haven't done something else to him, please."

Snape closed his eyes with a long hiss. As I suspected. Simply telling him the truth will not work. His loyalty to his friends runs too deep. And I would not care if he remained Charmed, ordinarily. If Harry had not told me what his memories contained, I would not even be trying this.

"When you have your memories back," he replied, opening his eyes, "you will see what I mean. But it takes a long time, and it is a very delicate process. Will you let me begin the first steps into your mind so that I can eventually reverse the Obliviate and let you see what lies behind it?"

Lupin closed his eyes. He was wrestling with the desire to know the truth, Snape thought. But he wondered what the other side could be.

Why wouldn't Lupin want the Charm off, now that he knew what was hiding behind it?

And then he knew, and the sudden shining contempt unleashed a torrent of words from him.

"You are afraid of losing your friends," he sneered. "You are afraid of losing these people who have tricked you, hurt you, betrayed you, Obliviated you, because they are the only friends you have." He thought back to Lupin as he had known him in school—painfully shy; horrified the few times he got angry, as though he could transform without the full moon calling to him; making no effort to find new friends even when he obviously disapproved of what his fellow Marauders were doing, because he just as obviously believed that no one else would befriend him. Something occurred to him that never had, given his rather personal involvement in the incident. "Tell me, Remus," he said, stressing the name and seeing Lupin flinch, "how did you feel when Black nearly made me dead and you into a murderer?"

Lupin sank back into his chair. Snape watched him, barely breathing. He knew that he needed Lupin's help with Harry if at all possible, but he would be worse than useless if he simply flinched when Harry was in danger, or handed Harry over to Dumbledore the moment he was asked to.

"I—that's not what he did," Lupin whispered.

"Really." Snape smiled. He knew it wasn't a pleasant smile. His smiles never were. "I could almost understand Black's actions against me, after all," he continued, voice soft and caressing. "I was his enemy. But you. You were his friend. If he had succeeded in his little—prank—then you would have killed me. You would have become the thing you feared most, the thing you hated most, the thing you fought so hard to avoid becoming. And all because your friend had an unreasonable grudge against me." He shook his head, clucking his tongue. "Tell me, Remus, why have you have remained friends with him after that? Why did you find some way to excuse it, even then, because, after all, Black is 'just being what he is?' No one has ever forced Black to grow up. Why not you?"

“Shut up.”

The voice was a snarl, and Lupin surged to his feet, his teeth bared and his amber eyes open and blazing. Snape felt a thrill of fear. This was the thing he had seen, or half-seen, or dreamed he had seen, on any number of occasions. It was close to the full moon, but Lupin was still dangerous, even without that. Snape had made a point of studying werewolves after one had so nearly killed him. He knew their strength, even in human form. Lupin carried the power to tear apart anyone he chose, at any moment, to transform someone not into an infected, cursed beast like himself, but into a corpse.

Lupin knew that, too, from the look in his eyes.

And he was sorry for it immediately afterwards, sitting down and putting his hands across his eyes. “Oh, Merlin,” he whispered. “I am so sorry, Severus.”

Snape took his leave without a word. He still intended to free the werewolf from his Memory Charm if he could. Harry wanted it. That was one good enough reason. But, more than that, he suspected that Lupin’s horror against getting angry extended mostly to himself. If he was hurt? He would swallow it and nod. If he learned that a child he loved was hurt...?

Snape did hope that he managed to break the Obliviate on a full moon, and that Lupin ‘forgot’ to take his Wolfsbane Potion before he leaped on Black. Death was too good for Black.

But I dare not use him as a mentor for Harry, the way I wanted to. He is afraid of his own anger. So is Harry. The last thing he needs is reinforcement on that.

He swallowed his pride, and found Minerva’s rooms, and knocked. She was in, luckily, and she invited him in the moment she saw his face. Snape suspected he did not look his best.

“What is it?” she asked, when she had him sitting in a chair across from her desk and drinking a cup of tea. The tea was strong enough

to nearly make Snape choke, but he drank it all the same. This was a ritual when he came and visited her. More than once, the teacup had ended up broken on the floor, flung by Snape when Minerva worked him up into a rage, but it was still a ritual. And this time, Snape thought he was unlikely to get angry.

He told her the whole story, and saw her eyes chill as she listened, one hand closing around the corner of her desk. When he had finished, and made his request, she nodded, once.

"Of course I will mentor Harry, Severus," she said. "But I can't promise that it will last much longer than your own protection of him, since Albus knows that I don't run blind at his heels any longer."

"I know," said Snape. "But he needs support, Minerva, and he needs to know what is going on, and I am afraid that Albus will carry out his threat if the boy tries to spend much time with me outside of class. I can send you Potions materials and books by owl. He can have them during his times with you, if you are agreeable."

"Why would I teach him Potions when I could teach him Transfiguration?" Minerva murmured, but her voice was dry, and she smiled. The smile vanished in the next moment. "I had not realized you were quite this dedicated to making his life better, Severus."

Snape raised his chin. She would accuse him of having a heart in a moment. It was one of her favorite remarks to make, and his to rage at.

But he said only, "I saw what his mind was like at the end of last year, Minerva. There is no way I could fail to help him after that. And I believe that others are beginning to notice his power. You have felt it. I have felt it. Others are turning towards it." He paused. "Some of the reading I have done has convinced me that he might easily be vates, if he chose to be."

Shock wiped her face clean, and then awe, and then hope. She nodded, slowly. "I see," she said. "Well. That is different. I will be happy to mentor him, Severus."

"Thank you," said Snape, and stood, and took his leave again.

He felt a slow pulse of anger and determination rise in him as he made his way back to the dungeons. Check and mate, Albus. But only for now. I don't think you realize how far I will go on fighting. If you take Minerva from him, I will free the werewolf. If you take him, or if he proves not strong enough to bear the burden, I will turn to the Malfoys. If they fail, then I will reach out to the purebloods who have sensed his power and know what it might mean, to the members of the Ministry who are not part of your Order, to the political enemies who would be happy to see you fall. To anyone but the Dark Lord himself my reach will go, until you are brought down and he is free.

You threatened me with a wildfire. I will unleash a firestorm, if need be.

If need be.

Chapter Eleven: The Lure of Power

Draco sighed and closed the book he held in his lap, rubbing at his eyes. They had begun to blur, and not even adjusting the color of the Lumos Charm would hold off the inevitable watering that would follow.

He could hear his mother's voice if he concentrated. Never read in the dark for more than an hour, dear. It will make you squint the next morning, and Malfoys are not supposed to squint.

But she was the one who had sent him the books, the one who had told him—via notes placed in the books at strategic spots—what was going on, the one who had shown him why he had to draw away from Harry for a time. Draco wondered gloomily why she had sent such fascinating books if she didn't expect him to be up until all hours of the morning reading them.

He put the book on the table next to his bed, and took a moment to stare through the opened curtains at Harry's bed. The curtains there were tightly drawn, as always. He could hear the soft breathing that marked Harry's sleep. He never snored. He sat up with a scream more often than a snore, or he would suddenly cease breathing altogether, and Draco knew he was lying still, terrified or tense, probably waiting for the appearance of enemies.

There had been more than once in the past month that Draco was tempted to go to him and soothe his nightmares, even if it was with something as simple as a handclasp.

But then he would have to explain why he had stayed away so long.

And Draco didn't yet know a way to tell Harry the truth without destroying him.

He put his hands behind his head, let out a long breath, and lay staring at the ceiling.

The first book had simply been fascinating—mostly explanations of the compulsion power that ran in several pureblood family lines, including the Black one, and explanations of what it could and could not do. Draco had wondered why his mother wanted him to have it.

Did she just want to insure that any compulsion power he used was trained? That made sense, but Draco really didn't think he had the gift. It usually manifested by the time a wizard was twelve, the book proclaimed, and Draco's thirteenth birthday had been the fifth of June.

He remembered it as a miserable day, mostly, given that Harry had been dozing in the hospital wing at the time, recovering from the damage to his mind, and he'd only wanted to be at his side.

Then he found the first note, tucked in between two pages of a philosophical argument about whether using the compulsion gift was ever moral. He unfolded it and recognized his mother's handwriting at once.

Draco, my darling—

I am hopeful that by now you will have figured out why I sent you these books. The compulsion gift is not irresistible, but it is subtle, and often changes the course of a wizard's mind without his realizing it.

Draco frowned when he was done reading it. Not irresistible. Fine, then. But what did she expect him to do with this information?

He flipped through the rest of the book, and found no more notes. He put that one down and picked up another with a rearing silver serpent on the front. Draco spent a few minutes staring at that. He knew he'd seen the symbol before, probably on a few artifacts around the Manor, but he couldn't remember what it indicated.

He opened it, and a folded piece of parchment fell out from between the cover and the first page. Draco picked it gingerly up and unfolded it, shaking dust off it. This book must have been packed away for a long time, wherever Mother had managed to find it.

Draco, my dearest—

There are other forms of compulsion than the compulsion gift. Sometimes, a wizard may not even realize that he is compelling others to follow his will, but he may do so unconsciously.

Once again, it was unsigned, but once again, Draco knew her handwriting. Wondering what this was all about, he settled back with the silver serpent book to read.

He quickly figured out that it was a history of the Guile family, whom he had indeed heard of. They'd managed to survive for centuries, playing Dark Lords against one another, never quite coming into the service of the Light Lords but making themselves appear innocent, until the last of them had died in the Dark Lord Grindelwald's armies.

But this was not a usual history. There were no musty family trees, no lists of great things that family members had done that were now forgotten, no lectures on what magical gifts might have been linked to their blood. This was a treatise on how the Guile family had survived the powerful wizards, what signs they had noticed that they were being compelled or swayed against their wills and how they had dealt with them.

Draco read the first few pages, and came upon the sentence Yet it was hard for Serpentina Guile to figure out what had happened to her at first, though she was a great witch. She finally noticed that whenever she was around the wizard Falcon and grew angry, he had only to grow angry in return to calm her. At once her feelings would be soothed, washed away in the tide of magic that rose with his rage, and she would obey whatever he asked of her.

Change the names, and it was a perfect description of what always happened lately when Draco grew angry at Harry.

Draco read hastily through the rest of the Guile book, and the other books that his mother had given him—a history of the Black family in particular, a book of laws that the Ministry had at one time enacted against those with the compulsion gifts, and a biography of the lives and magic of the Light and Dark Lords. It only took him three days, and by the end of those three days he had not only the books but a large array of parchment notes from his mother, folded and placed

into the books at various key points, to enable him to put the puzzle together.

Draco took a deep breath that Wednesday night in September, and picked up his mother's last and lengthiest note, found very near the end of the book on the Light and Dark Lords.

Draco, my beloved son—

I am sorry to have to hurt you like this. However, when Harry was at the Manor with you, I recognized the signs. You were gentler and sweeter than I had ever seen you be, even as a baby. You cared for him as if he were your world. Such attachment is not natural, is too fierce, in a child your age. And what had he done to cause you to grow such an attachment? I know that he saved your life in first year, but even before that, you still spoke of him in your letters, chattered as if you were obsessed with him. He became more than a figure of fun. He became your best friend.

I do not think it is all his magic, to be perfectly honest. I think you genuinely do see something in him that would have caused you to become friends even without that. But you could sense his power earlier than most of the others could, even when it was chained and held down by his webs. Malfoys have always been more magically sensitive. I fear that this caused his power to have a hold on your mind that it would not if you were one of your duller peers.

My darling, my dearest, I will not say that you should break your friendship with him. I will not say that merely because some of this is the effect of his magic, all of it must be. I will say that I want to see you free to make your own choice, not dragged along by Harry's magic, however subtly or unconsciously that may have happened. If you need this, if you decide that you need this, you must make the decision independent of the effect he has on you. The only way to do that is to withdraw from him for a while, and see if you can raise barriers against his power. You have the inheritance of the Black compulsion gift, and compellers themselves, as you will know from your reading, are immune to the effects of another's compulsion, and take less damage even from other spells that affect the mind, such as

the Fugitivus Animus that Harry performed. Perhaps you can use that to your advantage, to help you resurrect your free will.

I have already said I would move mountains to help you, my son. I will. Should you decide that Harry is, after all, a true friend and not merely an incipient Lord who managed to draw you into orbit with his power, then the world will shudder and fall before I see you parted, or see either of you harmed again. Only tell me.

I will see that you have your freedom. Without freedom, nothing matters.

With all my love,

Narcissa Black Malfoy.

Draco had closed his eyes. He was upset already, and he'd only been distant from Harry for three days.

But he could feel other effects as well. He felt more clear-headed, the cool distance that had always been his gift before he came to Hogwarts returning to him. He felt more like his father's son than he had in years. He felt as if he could make sarcastic comments to Connor Potter without looking guiltily at Harry first to see if he would approve of them.

But he had to keep taking out his bottle anyway and staring at it, to see that despite the faint red traces of irritation that crept into the colors from time to time, the overwhelming colors were still purple—Harry's protectiveness of him—and green—Harry's fondness for him.

Draco ground his hands into his eyes. He didn't want to do this. He didn't.

But he had to know how much of his friendship with Harry was just magic. He could see the way that that magic was beginning to attract other people too, now, see the way heads turned when Harry entered a room (Harry was utterly oblivious, of course). He could see the same thing with Dumbledore. What Draco had accepted as evidence of a presence or aura the Headmaster projected was actually his

magic. Wizards—pureblood wizards, at least, he corrected himself with a sneer—turned to meet it like flowers to the sun, or planets spinning around a star. Draco was starting to think from the book about the Light and Dark Lords that that was the main reason so many people grumbled about Dumbledore but didn't actually do anything to oppose him. The sheer strength of his magic lured them and soothed them and told them it would be impossible before they tried to accomplish anything.

How much of me is really Draco, and how much is Draco-because-of-Harry?

Draco decided he would have to find out.
“What’s your favorite color, Harry?”

Harry blinked and turned to look at him. Draco kept his face as emotionless as possible, even though he wanted to make a joke that would ease the bewilderment in Harry’s expression. This was a test that one of the books had suggested, and he wanted to see if he could pass it.

Though I am not sure what would count as passing or as failing, in this instance, he thought, and didn’t move.

“Green,” Harry said at last, still blinking.

Green, a voice whispered in Draco’s mind an instant after that.

Draco swallowed and glanced away from Harry, picking up his pumpkin pasty. That was a bad sign, that voice in his head. Harry’s magic was not only around him but within him, within the webs of his mind, or whatever he had in place of webs. It was a way that Lords could control their followers, making sure those servants knew them so well that they would do what they wanted before the Lords even commanded it.

Draco decided he would make a few more tests, and then he would have to withdraw from Harry almost completely.

It hurt not to be included in whatever had happened between Harry and the Headmaster, hurt that Millicent was the one who had escorted him to the hospital wing, hurt to see Harry talking to Millicent and Pansy as if they had always been his friends. Draco wondered sometimes whether it was worth the pain. Perhaps he should just tell Harry the truth now and let him make up his own mind about the strength of his magic.

But then he remembered that that was a sign that he was still very firmly under Harry's control. He turned back to the book on the Guile family and read until he came to a passage marked in a very firm hand. Someone had owned this book before the Malfoy family, he thought, or at least before his parents. This was not either of his parents' handwriting.

The passage said, And of course the emotional pain that Frederick Guile felt when he could not go at once to Grindelwald's side was a sign of how deeply the Dark Lord's magic had crept into his being. Why should he have felt such emotional pain, with him a pureblood and the Dark Lord no friend or child or sibling of his? But he did, and he could not stop shivering and longing to be a part of his life until he had Apparated to become a part of his battle. Distracted by what he was feeling, as no good pureblooded wizard should be, Frederick Guile lost his life in that battle.

The note in the margin said, Merlin take my magic if I am ever such a bloody fool.

This time, Draco noted the small letters near the end of that passage. A.M. Abraxas Malfoy, then, his grandfather, Lucius's father.

He wouldn't be proud, would he, to see a grandson of his going to a new Lord's side the moment he felt a slight disconnection from him? No, he wouldn't. Draco turned on his side and punched his pillow, and pretended it didn't tear at him when Harry came up and got into his bed without a word. He had to fight his way free. It had half-destroyed Harry to be tangled, bound up in someone else's magic. Draco would not do the same thing. If he had to leave Harry behind—

Panic clawed at his skin, made it break out in sweat and gooseflesh, and his heart raced. Draco drew the bottle from his pocket and stared at the green glow, threaded with red, until he was calm again. Then he deliberately finished the thought.

If he had to leave Harry behind, then he would. He knew it was for the best, the only way he could have a completely free will. And he knew it was what Harry would want, in that case. Harry would be horrified to think of someone else being a slave to his power.

Draco closed his eyes abruptly, feeling as if a hot brick had just dropped into the middle of his chest.

Even if I decide for him and renew our friendship, how am I ever going to tell him? It would kill him, to know that he had a part in altering someone else's mind and personality. How am I ever going to get him to see that he didn't mean to?

"Harry. We want to—"

"Talk to you."

Draco looked up intently around the corner of the book he was only pretending to read; by now, he had memorized most of the passages about the history of the Guile family. He had wondered when the Weasley twins, who could unquestionably feel Harry's power but preferred to just hover around him and follow him everywhere, would approach Harry. It seemed that that time was now, on an evening in the library very near the end of September.

Draco could have told them it wasn't a good time. Harry had been looking deeply stressed the last few days, ever since Professor McGonagall inexplicably started meeting with him and Professor Snape had taken to ignoring him. Harry seemed to know why. Draco had heard him come into their bedroom one night, radiating so much anger and so much power that the stones strained in the walls, and fall on his back on his own bed, muttering something about "Dumbledore." But he had not confessed it to Draco, or to anyone else that Draco knew of. Millicent tried to talk to him about it, and got a snarl that had her backing down very fast.

There was a small and selfish part of Draco that had cheered at that.

But the snarl had never quite gone anyway. Harry spent more time than ever studying these days, and kept his interactions with other people—except his brother—on the level of chill courtesy. His magic spent a lot of time expanding out from his body in rippling waves, and drawing more attention than ever. Draco had caught some of the Gryffindors staring hard at him the other day, including Granger, who seemed to have taken to sneezing whenever Harry was around. Harry, of course, didn't notice.

He was looking at the twins now with a distinctly unfriendly expression, but that didn't daunt them. Draco had long since come to the conclusion that a rampaging dragon would not daunt the Weasley twins. They would probably throw Dungbombs at it, just to make it even angrier, before taking it down with some brilliant and utterly unfair trick. Draco scowled. It was unfair for Weasleys to have that much sheer magical skill.

"We want to know what—" one of them began.

"You're planning to do with your power," the other one finished, and then they leaned forward and gave Harry identical piercing gazes.

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I don't know. Everyone keeps asking me that, and I just don't know." He rubbed a hand over the center of his forehead. Draco had seen him washing blood off his scar the other day, and had had to work very hard to keep himself from asking what was wrong. "But it probably wouldn't be to play jokes and pranks, so you can go away." He picked up the book he was looking at again. Draco frowned. What would Harry want with a book on the history of the First War with the Dark Lord? He had thought Harry knew all that already.

"There are other things to do with power like that than just play jokes and pranks, mate," said one of the twins, taking a chair across from Harry. Draco restrained the impulse to simply rush up and yank them away from him. His magic's affected me even more strongly than I thought, he decided fiercely, and flipped through his book looking for

some evidence of what it meant when someone else wanted to rush up and drag identical twins away from a powerful wizard.

"Yeah," said the other twin, who also took a chair. "Play tricks, for example."

Harry eyed them with a faint smile. It made Draco start when he realized that that was the first time Harry had smiled in days. And he ignored the sheer boiling jealousy that immediately rushed up from his stomach, over the fact that it was the twins who had made Harry smile. He didn't care who made Harry smile. He was strong. He was independent. He was staying away from Harry so that he could rebuild his free will.

"I don't want to do that, either," said Harry. "But I appreciate your concern. Really, I'm not going to do anything with it. Not just yet. Ron suggested I put up signs, and I'm not going to do that. Just sit here with it for a while." He turned back to his book. Draco knew that was a way of suggesting he was done with the conversation. He scowled at himself and flipped through the Guile book again, wondering how they had resisted Lords whose slightest gesture they could read.

The twins exchanged glances for a moment, communicating with silent flickers of their eyes. Then they shrugged and stood. "Just let us know when you do decide to do something," said one of them.

"Yes," said the other, his eyes lighting up again. "We could help you chain the Headmaster up, maybe. It's obvious that you don't like him."

Harry looked up, the skin around his eyes tightening. Draco knew that meant he was anxious. Damn it, why can I still read him so well?

"I don't want to chain anyone," said Harry, his voice quiet but passionate. "Not at all."

The twins grinned and bowed. "Well, not gaolers, then," said the one on the left. "What about court jesters? Can we be Your Lordship's jesters?"

"Never call me that."

Draco would not have been surprised if every pureblood in the school felt the force of that command. It stabbed through his head like an iron sword, driven by the force of Harry's outrage. The twins staggered, and several books on the library shelves flew up and hovered in the air like silent sentries, as though they were eagles prepared to stoop on Harry's enemies.

Draco let out a long, slow breath, trying to recover from rejoicing at the sheer level of magic in the air, and then opened his mouth. This was a perfect test. The Guile book gave several examples of this. Once someone who was a Lord because of the level of his magic, whether or not he claimed the title, gave a command like that, it should be impossible for him to disobey it. The words shouldn't pass his lips.

"Harry, the Lord," he said, clearly.

He stared at nothing in particular as Harry stormed out of the library, his magic still sweeping around him like wings, and the books fell to the floor, and the twins scattered as Madam Pince came charging around the corner like the rampaging dragon Draco had been imagining earlier. She paid no attention to Draco at all, assuming that whatever had caused noise in her library, the Weasley twins were behind it. Draco was glad. She could have yelled at him, and he still would have sat there, glassy-eyed and staring.

He shouldn't have been able to disobey.

How could he?

Draco watched Harry more carefully than ever for the first two weeks of October. And he could only conclude that he must have been blind before, because whatever signs Harry was displaying of being a wizard who could command others with his sheer presence, he countered them with signs of being something else altogether.

He did influence people. He could make them back down and do what he said when his anger flared. He was so powerful that he drew attention wherever he went, by the mere fact of his magic. Draco

practiced not letting his eyes turn towards Harry, and found it unexpectedly hard.

And he also never influenced people for long. Millicent avoided him one day when Harry had muttered something about not wanting her around, but there she was the next one, cajoling a reluctant smile out of him. When Draco concentrated through Harry's anger, he had no problem resisting whatever it was that Harry might want in that moment of his rage. He could look away from Harry. It took some effort, but there it was. It didn't take that much, really, not when he was practiced at it.

If Harry really was going to become a Dark Lord of the same kind as You-Know-Who or a Light Lord of the same kind as Dumbledore, none of those things should have been true.

Draco was confounded.

And then came a night at the second week of October, the night he had lain awake brooding about how he would tell Harry the truth even if he wanted to, and finally fell asleep staring at the ceiling of his bed.
"Draco?"

Draco blinked his eyes open, thinking this had to be a dream. There was no way that Harry would be standing there, framed in the curtains of his bed, his wand blazing with a Lumos, if it wasn't a dream. He hadn't reached out for Draco in the long weeks of their separation, not even when he had a nightmare or when he was obviously angry and hurting and barely talking to anyone else. Draco sat up, rubbing at his hair and his eyes and trying to think of what to say.

Harry took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of his bed. His scar and his eyes were both vivid in the shifting light. "Draco," he said gently. "I—I was going to wait until you said something, because I don't know what I did to anger you." He bit his lip. "But I can't stand this anymore," he said, abrupt, low, and fierce. "I need to know why you're upset with me. I need to know what I did wrong."

Draco stared at him. None of the books had said anything about incipient Lords seeking people out to ask what had angered them, either.

And he had thought that Harry would not. He meant less to Harry than Harry did to him. That had always been obvious. Harry might miss him, but he would never try to repair an apparent breach in their friendship.

Except that, apparently, he did, said Draco, when Harry misinterpreted his silence and sighed.

"Look," said Harry. "I know I shouldn't have let it go on this long. But I really did notice that you were angry, Draco, and I've kept noticing, and I just—I miss having you for a friend, all right?" He turned his head away, and Draco could see the stinging blush on his cheeks.

"I am not good at this," he said in the next moment, his voice gone flat. "The only person I've ever really cared about conflicting with before was Connor, and I yield to him. But I can't just yield to you. But I want to know what's wrong. Is it something I can help with? Is it something I can listen to? Or do we have to just stop being friends, because of whatever it was I did?" He swallowed harshly, a little click that Draco knew Harry didn't mean for him to hear.

Draco closed his eyes. Shock was yielding to other emotions. He knew that Harry couldn't have come to him and said this last year. His webs wouldn't have let him. His focus on his brother to the exclusion of all else wouldn't have let him. The fact that he seemed willing to let Draco's friendship simply drop away from him when he came back from Easter holidays was a sign of that, too.

That wouldn't happen now, Draco was fairly sure. Harry would fight to keep their friendship intact, even if it took him more than a month to admit he wanted it to be intact.

Draco swallowed himself, and sat up to hug Harry. He felt Harry stiffen in surprise, then relax and even hug him back, his wand pressing awkwardly against Draco's spine.

"Are you going to tell me what got you so angry?" he whispered.

Draco closed his eyes. He still didn't know how to tell Harry the truth. He still wondered if he should try to pull away again, to achieve some semblance of independence.

But he no longer thought that all the answers could be found in books. And he had missed Harry, damnit. Now that he was aware of what Harry's power could do and prepared to make conscious decisions about it if Harry asked him to do something he didn't want to do, Draco thought he could have their friendship back. He certainly appreciated it more than he ever had.

And so did Harry.

"It's something that I think would hurt you to know about right now," Draco whispered. "Please? Can it wait?"

Harry started a bit, but then relaxed when Draco's arms didn't move away. "Of course it can," he said. "I just—you're my best friend, Draco, and I need to know that you're all right. I thought you weren't, and it was driving me mad." He chuckled painfully. "Millicent kept asking me about the sour expression on my face all last week."

"That was about me?" Draco asked incredulously. Harry had never answered Millicent. Draco had assumed the sour expression came from any one of the numerous pressures Harry was dealing with: controlling his magic, studying with Professor McGonagall, playing at a badly-feigned coolness with Snape, coping with the fact that his godfather was trying to be affectionate with him and failing, and cheering on his brother, whose compulsion gift Harry was more and more obviously uneasy with.

"Of course it was," said Harry, as if it should be obvious. "I was worried about you, Draco."

"Prat," Draco grumbled into his shoulder, hugging Harry tightly enough to make him squeak. "Stubborn, idiotic prat. You could have come and asked me."

"Yes," said Harry. "But it took me this long."

"And you're really willing to wait to hear about it?" Draco asked, once more, just because he had to be sure.

"Of course." Harry pulled away from him and blinked at him. "I trust you, Draco."

Draco made his decision in that moment. To Azkaban with Lords and whether he had to stay away from Harry to be completely independent of him. He would just go along, deciding day to day on his independence if he had to, and getting Harry ready for the news that his magic could compel people, or something like it, even if he didn't mean to. Someday, Draco thought, he would be ready for it.

He was free. He made this choice freely. Draco said so, and felt no chain or compulsion holding him back.

He hugged a startled Harry again. "Now tell me what's been going on with you," he said, and settled down to be startled and angry and amused and outraged all in turn, confident that he was where he wanted to be.

Dear Mother:

I know that I made this request of you once before, but I hadn't considered everything you sent me then. Now I have, and I've freely chosen, and my request is still the same.

Please, move the mountains.

Your beloved son,

Draco.

Chapter Twelve: How Like a Lion

"Harry! What are you doing in there?"

"Just a minute!" Harry yelled out through the door of the loo, and splashed some more water on his forehead, washing the scum of blood from his scar. He sighed when he realized the lightning bolt was once again filling with crimson. That troubled him more than the crippling headache he'd awakened with. He could hide the headache; Tom Riddle's possession last year had given him plenty of practice. A bleeding scar was something else.

Draco was knocking harder than ever on the door. "I'm coming in there in two minutes, Harry Potter!"

"I'm done!" Harry reassured him, while he checked his scar. Yes, it would probably take a few hours to fill and drip again. The blood rose slowly, as though it were forcing its way out past thick barriers of muscle and skin. He thought the few hours he had promised to spend in the library with Luna, helping her get caught up on the lessons she'd missed last year when she'd been Petrified, would push its limits, but with luck he should be able to clean it again before the blood spilled down his face.

Draco opened the door before Harry could get there. Harry gave him a sharp glance. "That wasn't two minutes," he pointed out.

"I lied," said Draco, and caught Harry's hand, pushing back his fringe before he could stop him. Harry turned his head away, but Draco had already seen his scar, and the livid color it had turned.

"I thought so," Draco whispered, and then raised his voice. "Somehow you forgot to mention your bleeding scar in your account of the last few weeks, Harry."

Harry glared at him and hurried towards the library, Draco keeping up with him easily. Draco had, most unfairly, started into a growth spurt, and he never seemed to trip over himself the way some of the other boys did, either. "Why didn't you mention it?" he asked insistently. "Why did you feel that you had to keep that one thing concealed from

me?" Then he paused, and Harry knew the thoughts that were running through his head. If you kept one thing from me, how many other things have you kept?

There were a few others, but none of them were Draco's business. He didn't need to know the details of Harry's meetings with Peter; that was Peter's secret, and Harry's to keep. He didn't need to know that Harry sometimes felt like hexing his brother when Connor preached about the goodness of compulsion gifts to him, because then he would feel like he'd been right about Connor all along. He didn't need to know how intensely uncomfortable Sirius was making Harry. That was a private matter, especially given the conflict Harry was feeling between his emotions for Sirius and his emotions for Snape.

And he didn't need to know about the scar bleeding, because that would involve explaining the dreams, and Harry had no idea how to explain them. What did a dream of two dark figures and a dream of other dark figures tightening in a ring about him have to do with anything? Harry had figured out that he only woke with the headache and his scar bleeding on the nights he had them, but they told him nothing he didn't already know. Yes, he had enemies. That had been obvious since the first time he fought Bellatrix Lestrange—since the first time he learned about Connor having enemies, really.

Except that, from his stare, Draco thought he did have to know, and that a few details meant he deserved the whole thing.

"I'll tell you later," said Harry, trying to hurry ahead as he reached the doors of the library. Draco lengthened his stride and caught him easily. Harry whirled to face him. He got angry much more easily now, and the one good effect of that was that he was sure he wasn't letting his rage collect in a hidden place and build up any more. "Why do you insist on accompanying me everywhere, anyway?"

"The Headmaster might hurt you," said Draco, not looking away from him.

Harry snarled. "Yes, but he's not going to try where someone else can see. I'll be safe with Luna."

“Yes, and on the way there?”

Harry turned away again. He knew that he was Draco’s friend, and he knew that Draco was his, but this intense care unnerved him. As he had told Snape, it was one thing for someone to value people in general, and another thing altogether for them to show that they valued him.

He strode into the library, his mind already buzzing through the million and one things it seemed he had to do. Private work with McGonagall, finishing the brewing of Hawthorn’s Wolfsbane Potion, coming up with a response to Lucius’s truce gift, tutoring Luna, tutoring Neville, Quidditch practice, his own homework, spending time with Draco so that he wouldn’t feel lonely, reading Bindings of Magic, visiting Connor and Sirius...

Harry’s life was already a whirling circus. He couldn’t imagine what it would become should he actually do something with his power, the way that people kept begging him to.

He sighed with relief to see Luna sitting at the table they’d agreed on, with her books spread in front of her. Of course, he faltered a bit when he came closer and saw that she had Divination and Arithmancy textbooks, since she took neither class.

“Luna?” he said softly, and she looked up at him, protuberant eyes blinking from behind her glasses. “Are you—all right?” There were some days where she was more all right than others.

“Of course, Harry,” said Luna, with the same gravity that she said everything. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You don’t take those classes,” said Harry, sitting down in the chair across from her. Draco took the one beside him, and made a comment under his breath that might or might not have included the word “Loony.” Harry gave him a glare that promised a hex when they got back to the Slytherin common room, and then turned to smile again at Luna. “What would you want with them?”

"I want you to teach me about them," said Luna. "You're taking the classes, aren't you, Harry? I asked someone, and they told me that you were."

Harry winced a bit. He hoped that whoever Luna had asked hadn't hurt her. He would have to ask the other Slytherins what they'd seen tonight. Most of the students, especially other Ravenclaws, didn't seem to understand that hurting Luna always resulted in Harry finding out about it, no matter how quiet they tried to be or where they did it. The other Slytherins thought it was a fine game, watching out for Luna, reporting it to Harry, and then watching for what clever or embarrassing hex he inflicted on the ones who'd embarrassed her in return.

Harry hadn't yet got Neville to confide the same mistreatment to him. He insisted that he could handle himself, and that anyway no one in Gryffindor mocked him too badly. Harry didn't believe him. It was taking time to coax Neville out of his shell, though, especially since he hadn't spent half of last year with his peers.

"Yes, I am taking these classes," he said, to get himself back on track, and picked up the Divination textbook. "Where did you want to start? Tea leaves? Crystal balls?"

"Dreams," said Luna.

Harry sent her a sharp glance. She looked back at him, serene and serious as ever, and if she had ulterior motives, she hid them better than anyone else Harry had ever seen.

"All right," he said, and opened *Unfogging the Future* to the right page. His own textbook always fell open to that place automatically now. He had read the brief descriptions of dream interpretation over and over again, hoping against hope there was something that could help him with his nightmares. But Trelawney's books were as useless as Trelawney herself. "What did you want to know?"

"About dark dreams," said Luna. "Nightmares."

Harry could have recited the paragraph from memory, but he pretended to be reading, for Luna's and Draco's sakes. Their eyes on him felt like skewers. He wished they would stop—stop looking so calm, stop looking as though there was a hidden purpose behind this, stop looking at him. "Um. Reading dark dreams is different from the art of reading light dreams, also commonly called prophetic dreams. While light dreams are the will of the future reaching down to touch those so favored, nightmares, also called dark dreams, represent a different kind of favor. They are commonly accepted as either the dreamer's fears made manifest, or, occasionally, as the reaching back of a future so awful that it wants to prevent itself from happening."

He leaned back in his chair. "Luna, what questions did you have?"

"What kind of dreams do you have, Harry?"

Harry stared at her. He didn't dare look at Draco. Luna sat with her quill poised above her parchment and just regarded him calmly.

"Oh, normal dreams," Harry managed to say. "You know, the kind that you always have when you go to sleep." He forced a smile, and hoped it looked more natural than it felt. "The other night, I dreamed that a door was chasing me."

Luna nodded. "And what about other kinds?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nightmares," said Luna. "Do you ever have nightmares, Harry? I dream about the Wrackspurts possessing me, the way they possessed you last year." Luna never had accepted the Tom Riddle explanation for the possession. "What are your nightmares?"

"I don't have nightmares, Luna," said Harry. He didn't want to hurt her, didn't want to scare her. Merlin knew he was already doing that to enough people; he'd had a huge argument with Connor about it just the other day. "Just regular dreams."

"He has nightmares every night," said Draco.

Harry whipped around. "Draco!" he squawked.

"You prat," said Draco, seizing his arm and brushing back his fringe again. His finger rose and touched Harry's scar, then came back down and forced Harry to acknowledge the glistening red liquid on it. Harry winced. He'd started bleeding sooner than he thought. "She's trying to help. Can't you see that? And I'm tired of you not talking about this. What happened to moving forward and being honest, Harry? You said that you would."

Harry closed his eyes. His headache was returning, despite the potion he'd brewed himself last night and taken this morning. "I know. I just...I don't know why I'm having the nightmares, all right? I just am."

"Do they have to do with Voldemort?" Luna asked.

Harry stared at her. He'd never heard anyone else but Dumbledore and his family pronounce the Dark Lord's true name without stumbling. Luna just gazed back at him, waiting for the answer, and didn't seem to realize there was anything remarkable in what she'd done.

"They can't," said Harry. "How could they?" He remembered the dreams that he'd had about Quirrell in first year, and the dreams about Tom Riddle last year. Well, yes, the Tom Riddle dreams had had to do with Voldemort, but they were Voldemort, the signs of Riddle working his way into Harry's mind. The others were—dreams. "If anyone is going to dream about Voldemort, it should be Connor. Riddle himself told me that Connor's scar is some kind of connection to him."

"This looks like a pretty damn good connection to me," said Draco, swiping his finger across the scar again and holding it up. There was enough blood to soak the palm of his hand and spill towards his wrist. "Damn it, Harry, what do you dream about?"

Harry took a deep breath. Backed into a corner like this, he had no choice but to talk about it, and he had promised himself that he would

try to stop hiding things. He really had no choice, unless he wanted his confined magic and his confined rage back. He told them about the dreams, and emphasized their vagueness and the fact that he had no idea what they related to.

“I think I know.”

Harry turned around abruptly. Merlin, how many people know now? Hermione Granger apparently did, since she was behind him and looking at him, her face somewhere between serious and worried.

“Do you,” Draco said, his body language gone tense, his hand making the hovering motion that Harry recognized as Draco’s version of being ready to reach for his wand. He didn’t like Hermione, or any of the Gryffindors, really. He barely tolerated Neville. Harry couldn’t figure out why, since all Draco ever said when asked was They’re Gryffindors, Harry!

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I wondered why I was sneezing all the time around you, Harry,” she added. “And I think I figured it out. And, well, if I’m right, then you have some pretty Dark magic. I think the shadows you’re seeing in your mind are your own fears of your magic. You know that you’re doing something wrong, even if it’s unconscious—“

“Shut up, Granger.”

Harry had never heard Draco sound so deadly. He was on his feet now, wand in hand, never wavering from the way it pointed at Hermione. His face was pale, his eyes gone dark, and a few flecks of actual foam shining near his lips. Alarmed, Harry stood and put himself in between Draco and Hermione.

He wondered, tiredly, how many people he would have to shield from overzealous Gryffindors in a month’s time. Of course, this time it was probably the other way around, but he wasn’t sure about that. Hermione was one of the most powerful witches in the school. She would give Draco more trouble than Draco probably suspected in a hexing contest.

"Stop it, Draco," Harry said over his shoulder. "These dreams have troubled me for months." Well, one of them had troubled him for months, but he didn't care to dwell on the distinction right now. "If Hermione thinks she's figured out one of them, or even both, then I want to hear what she thinks."

Draco's hand clamped down on his shoulder, hard enough that Harry gasped and winced. "But this has to do with the thing I told you about already," Draco whispered into his ear. "The thing I didn't want to tell you about because it would hurt you. Please, Harry. Leave it be. You do not want to hear this." The last words sounded almost like one sentence, spoken in the same intense whisper.

Harry frowned. He couldn't imagine how Hermione's theory and Draco's secret could be the same thing, but it would certainly fit with Draco's sudden and overwhelming reaction. Nothing seemed to drive him mad quite like threats to Harry's safety. Harry had had to stop him from hexing Dumbledore three times this last week.

"I think I want to hear it," he said, and turned back towards Hermione.

Draco's arms descended, clamping around his waist and squeezing the breath out of him. "No, no, no," he whispered. "Harry, please, trust me. Do what I tell you. Turn around and walk out of the library now. I'll make your apologies to Luna. I'll listen to Granger and tell you if they really were the same thing when she's done, and I'll report it honestly. But don't listen to her."

Harry attempted to pull himself free of Draco's grip. It held firm. Harry sighed and glanced at Hermione.

"I think he can choose whether or not to hear this for himself, Malfoy," said Hermione, putting her nose up. "And he deserves to hear it, whatever you think. Harry, I think you have the ability to—"

"Silencio."

Harry stared. The spell hadn't come from Draco, even though he'd torn one arm free of Harry's waist and was groping frantically for his wand. It had come from Luna, who walked up and looked Hermione

up and down as she mouthed silently. Then she turned and glanced up at Harry.

"It's like the necklace I gave you last year," she said. "The one to protect against Wrackspurts. Sometimes you need a necklace, and sometimes you need a spell."

Harry blinked, once, twice, again. He had the feeling that there was something very profound in what Luna had just said, though he couldn't reason out what it was. "Thank you, Luna," he said slowly.

Luna nodded. "You should never let Wrackspurts get hold of you," she said. "Or the Heliopaths, either." She turned and wandered over to her books, gathered them up, and then wandered out of the library. Harry supposed that meant their study session was at an end.

Hermione was still mouthing in outrage. Harry glanced at her and sighed. He knew he should release the spell and listen to what she had to say. Hermione was a brilliant researcher. If she had found something among the books that related to the dreams, it might take Harry months to duplicate her. He was good at applying knowledge he'd already consumed, not so much at finding it.

If you were a Gryffindor, then you would take the spell off and listen to her, said a voice in his head. Harry suspected it was Connor's voice. That was one of the things they'd fought about, lately. Connor said that Sirius had said Slytherin House was fundamentally untrustworthy, and had given him stories about all of Harry's classmates' parents to prove it. Connor was always full of stories about Sirius saying this or that. He was disappointed that Harry couldn't seem to repair his relationship with him and become a dutiful godson again, and told Harry so at every opportunity.

If you were a Gryffindor, if you were brave, if you were like a lion, then you would listen to her.

But Harry wasn't, and so in the end he sighed and walked out of the library. Draco was nearly prancing at his side, as though he suspected that he was responsible for Harry's decision to leave without freeing Hermione.

Harry rubbed his scar again, and Draco dragged his hand away from it and pointedly showed Harry the blood. "You're going to Madam Pomfrey," he announced.

"She'll put me in a bed and want me to sleep," said Harry. "And that won't work, Draco. If I sleep, I'll dream, and my scar will bleed again. Let it go. I only have to clean it off every few hours."

Draco stared at him. "And I never noticed?"

Harry was about to argue that yes, Draco had noticed the scar bleeding, when he realized that Draco meant the frequency of times he'd washed the scar. He sighed through his nose. "I guess you didn't," he admitted.

"You're far too good at hiding things, Harry," said Draco, with a sadness in his voice that Harry supposed he might understand if he concentrated. But he couldn't concentrate for very long. He had to get to Quidditch practice early, since his study session with Luna had ended early.

He was about to hurry off when Draco's hand touched his shoulder again. Harry looked up and met a pair of eyes so concerned that he abruptly hugged Draco, simply to reassure him.

Draco hugged back, muttered, "Be safe," and then went off in the opposite direction. Harry ran faster than ever. Flint, who had failed his NEWTS last year and so been kept back an extra year, really, really didn't like it when anyone on the team was spending free time dithering about elsewhere, but he would make an exception and be especially harsh with Harry, since he thought Harry was their team's key to victory.

Harry had just left the Great Hall and turned towards McGonagall's office when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and backed off immediately when he saw the Headmaster. His magic rose to bind him in protective walls. Probably Dumbledore had found some way past the modified mirror spell Harry had cast on him.

Instead, Harry saw, Dumbledore was avoiding eye contact. That meant the spell still held. Probably, Harry emphasized to himself. After the way Dumbledore had tricked Snape from his side—McGonagall had told him the story on the night she'd taken over his tutoring—Harry would believe anything of the Headmaster, including that he would pretend the spell still held when in fact he had overcome it.

"Please come to my office, my dear boy," Dumbledore dared to say.
"We have much to discuss."

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, but I'm meeting with Professor McGonagall now," Harry said, as calmly as he could. He would be polite. He could be polite. He would not scream the roof down and set Dumbledore on fire as he wanted to. Besides, trying to set him on fire would probably only result in more ice. No matter what spells Harry practiced with, his magic and his rage both remained cold. That was another thing that had bothered Connor when he confessed it.

"You are not, Harry," Dumbledore said firmly.

Harry froze. "What did you say?"

"I said that you are not," said Dumbledore. "I have relieved Minerva of the responsibilities of teaching you. She is not your Head of House, and as Transfiguration Professor, she has other students who need her attention. She agreed with me. I believe her exact words were that a Slytherin student should be able to find other ways to learn." Dumbledore smiled at him.

Harry smiled back at him, which appeared to disconcert the Headmaster. He heard McGonagall's words for what they were, a salute and a statement of faith. And she had not outright been forbidden from associating with him, as Snape had been. They might still be able to meet on the sly. McGonagall had thought it better to yield than contest to the bitter end.

Sometimes, she is almost Slytherin, he thought, and then looked up at the Headmaster. Dumbledore avoided his eyes. He was probably thinking of magic to use on Harry right now, then. Probably. "Will all

due respect, Headmaster, I won't want you teaching me in her place. There are reasons that it I don't want it. I hope you understand them."

Dumbledore only waved a hand. "That can be arranged later, Harry. Either Remus or Sirius would be an excellent candidate for your next teacher."

Harry concealed his snort. Remus he could see, but Sirius... Only if I want a course in ranting about Slytherins or twitching. He had only disliked Sirius more when he learned he was the cause of Dumbledore's attack on Snape. Harry was sure that Sirius had lied about the false memory. It sounds like the kind of thing he'd make up, secure in the knowledge that the Headmaster would back him, because the Headmaster likes Gryffindors so much. It doesn't matter that it's so ridiculous. Dumbledore supports him.

"No, this is something else," said Dumbledore, solemn now, and drew a large letter forth from his pocket. Harry recognized the seal of the Ministry on the front. He nodded slowly.

"Lead the way, Headmaster," he said.

Once they were seated in Dumbledore's office, and Harry had refused tea and sweets and another cup of tea, the Headmaster handed over the Ministry's letter. Harry wasted no time in opening it.

Dear Mr. Potter:

We realize this must come as a shock to you, and indeed we are in a somewhat unusual position ourselves. Normally, we would write to the parents of a child your age. However, on contacting your parents, they claimed to have only one son, Connor Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, though birth records and your attendance at Hogwarts clearly prove your existence, and they did admit to remembering a Harry Potter who had moved away or died a long time ago. They seemed to think that you were a relative of your father.

This is a sign of Dark magic in operation, and as such, we are forced to resort to this rather unusual form of communication, and of request.

It has come to our attention that you exhibit powerful magic, both Light and Dark, that you did not exhibit last year. We understand that such magic is not your fault, but the result of your birth, and we hasten to assure you that we do not regard you as at fault. However, each magical child so powerful must have a guardian in order for the wizarding community at large to assure themselves that the magic is not going wild or untrained. Since we have contacted your parents and they are victims of Dark magic that causes them to deny your existence, we currently believe they are not suitable guardians for you.

We would ordinarily appoint a guardian ordered by the Wizengamot, but your case is special enough that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is concerned with it. We believe you should have a guardian who a) lives on the grounds of Hogwarts, so that you may continue to attend school and acquire training for your magic, and b) is someone you trust, which will make your training all the easier, and c) can learn some of the facts of the case, as powerful wizards do not usually emerge as you do and we fear there may be something unnatural in your magic, perhaps as a result of the Dark spell cast on your parents. As someone who fulfills all of these conditions except the last, we have chosen Albus Dumbledore. Please sign the letter enclosed with this one; it will confirm the Department's choice of guardian and grant us permission to release the facts of the case, as we understand them, to him. It also grants you the option to choose your own guardian, provided that he or she fulfills the criteria set forth in this letter.

Amelia Bones
Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry turned the letter over for a moment, wondering why they had contacted him instead of Dumbledore directly. Was it the unusual nature of the case, or the fact that his parents were still alive but victims of an unknown curse, or--?

And then he knew what it probably was, and wanted to laugh. The Ministry would have heard about his magic. And they would want to keep things quiet, since Harry was Connor's brother. All of this was being arranged to pass the case along as quietly and as quickly as

possible, without the possibility of either making it public or vexing Harry.

Harry glanced up at the smiling face of Dumbledore. “The Ministry contacted my parents,” he said. “They don’t remember me, so they’re appointing a guardian who has to live on Hogwarts grounds and oversee my training. They want to appoint you.”

Dumbledore’s smile grew wider. “That would be wonderful, Harry. I have long looked forward to an opportunity to work more closely with you.”

Harry nodded at him, then turned back to the letter enclosed with Amelia Bones’s letter. It had a simple line for his signature (magically binding, of course) if he accepted Dumbledore as his guardian, and another few lines for him to fill out, complete with signature, if he wanted another guardian. The letter warned him sternly that his chosen guardian would have to comply with all the standards set out by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the original document.

The necessary words were written, and a brilliant white flash traveled around the room. Harry chuckled to himself. He would have to study the Ministry letters and see what magic they used, if he got the chance. His hand was already empty, the letter having apparently communicated with the original document to confirm that the chosen guardian met the standards set forth in it, with him to confirm that this was what he really wanted, and with Hogwarts to confirm that the chosen guardian was in residence, and then taken itself off to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry wondered idly if the Aurors had come up with that particular spell, or if it was the product of some overworked and underpaid researcher.

“Excellent, Harry!” Dumbledore said, sitting back. “May I see the original letter?”

Harry handed it over to him, and waited in patient silence as he read it. Dumbledore glanced up at the end of it, blinking. “I am flattered that you have changed your mind about trusting me, Harry,” he said.

"I haven't," said Harry, and enjoyed seeing Dumbledore's face change. I can be like a lion, sometimes. I can face what I have done. "There is that option they mention at the end, about choosing my own guardian. I did. And, as you saw, he met all the standards set forth in the letter." He shrugged.

"Who?" Dumbledore whispered.

"Professor Severus Snape, of course," said Harry pleasantly.

Dumbledore stood. Harry could sense the power rising around him. He met Dumbledore's eyes calmly. "Will you really do this, Headmaster?" he asked. "We could destroy Hogwarts if we were dueling. You know that."

"You have not asked Severus, Harry," said the Headmaster. "Are you quite sure that he would be willing to take on a burden?"

"Oh, I am quite sure that he would be," said Harry, and bared his teeth in what was not a smile.

Dumbledore stared at him for a long moment, then sat back down and shook his head. "I must admit I do not understand, Harry," he said softly. "Why would you do this? There are so many things that you must be trained in, so many things you do not understand, and I am the one who can best train you to know them."

"You haven't explained them so far," said Harry. "You made me a slave. Merlin only knows why, but I trust Snape, and he's proven how much he's willing to risk for me."

"I will make every effort to remove him from you again," said Dumbledore calmly. "You must know that."

"I know that," said Harry.

"How long will we play this game?" Dumbledore's face was long and sad, sad enough to break a heart. "How long until we are the allies we must be to defeat Voldemort, Harry?"

"As long as it takes," said Harry, and turned his back. Dumbledore didn't try to make him remain in the office.

Harry made for the dungeons. He walked up to Snape's office and knocked on the door, knowing the professor was working late on Remus's Wolfsbane Potion.

The look on Snape's face when he opened the door made all Harry's anger at Dumbledore dissolve. "Idiot child!" Snape hissed. "What are you doing here? If the Headmaster—"

"I just made you my guardian by filing a paper with the Ministry," Harry interrupted him. "Can I come in?"

Snape stared at him intently for a long moment. There was a bare flicker of warmth in his eyes before he inclined his head and moved out of the way. "Idiot child," he said again, more mildly this time. "I suppose that you have left all your brewing equipment with Minerva."

"Yes," said Harry agreeably.

"Well, we will ask her for it tomorrow. In the meantime, come here and make yourself useful for once."

Harry moved over to brew one of the lesser potions that the Wolfsbane took. After working so hard on Hawthorn's batch, he could tell easily where the brewing was at any stage.

"And Harry?"

Harry glanced up. Snape was watching him with his head on one side.

"Well done," Snape said quietly.

This time, it destroyed the bitter memory of what he had said after the Veritaserum and replaced it with a good one. Harry grinned at him and turned back to his brewing.

Interlude: A Little Knowledge

October 17th, 1993

Dear Mr. Potter:

I hope you will forgive the formal means of salutation at the beginning of this letter, and the charm that I have placed on this parchment to make my handwriting unfamiliar. I do know you, I know a great deal about you, and it feels hypocritical to hide behind a mask that I have created. However, I feel I have no choice. If you knew who I was, you would question me, distrust my motives for communicating with you like this, and above all demand answers that you would not believe. Please, be patient with me, and read what I write here, and do your best to open your mind and grant that the possibility of truth is here, if not the reality of it.

I am under pressure as I write this. There are many who would like nothing better than to take away the choice I am intent on giving you—

No, those are the wrong words. The choice has always been yours, and I am not the one who will give it to you. I am the one who, if all goes well and you grant the possibility of truth to these words, will let you know it exists.

You will have read the history of the First War with the Dark Lord. You will have read other histories. I know that you are astonishingly well-versed in ancient pureblood customs, and that you have used that knowledge in the past to dance with purebloods and best them on their own territory. However, I am asking you to reconsider a very simple fact of that history:

Why has the title used always been “Lord?” (Or “Lady,” as in the case of the Light Lady Calypso McGonagall, but I must admit ruefully that witches often have better sense than to become involved in games of conquest and power, preferring instead to dwell on the inner mind and develop their own control of themselves).

The title is important, Mr. Potter. It stakes a claim as well as announces what the wizard is to the whole world. The purebloods, and the Muggleborns—it is not the name I was born using for them, but I know it is the one you prefer—once they became part of the wizarding world, grant a certain recognition by using it. They acknowledge that the wizard holding it possesses power—power over them. Magic, Mr. Potter. It sings more sweetly than you can know, since you grew up with so much of your own power confined, one Lord in our world held up as a figure for you to revere, and one identified as the target of your enmity.

Dark Lords tend to conquer. Light Lords tend to rule. Both sway followers to their sides with the sheer lure of being near so much magic. And if one has to grant them the title of Lord and sometimes obey their commands, what of it? At least that immense power is not turned against them. And for many servants of the Lords, it has been about more than fear of that power, or even shared ideals. We were born to be near magic, those of us who carry it in our blood. It strengthens us, revitalizes us, cleanses our souls, works a rebirth in our perceptions of ourselves, changes our relationship to the world around us. Imagine it flowing over you like waves of an ocean that you can breathe, and which at the same time is light and sweet music and the scent of roses (or whichever flower you prefer). It is intoxicating. Not impossible to resist, especially once one is aware of it, but very convincing, very ensnaring.

Now imagine, Mr. Potter, what would happen if a wizard with such power came into our world—and did not claim the title of Lord. Imagine that he instead looked upon such compulsions as the Lords have been wont to use, and disdained them. Imagine that he worked to wield his power with such finesse and such delicacy that it would not harm the minds around it. Imagine he offered possibilities to those around him, paths for the future and hopes they could never have achieved without his magic to back them. Imagine that he was conscious, every moment, of what his power could do and what it might be used for, and weighed the hopes of those who came to him, and rejected the ones he deemed wrong instead of mindlessly obeying every wizard's wish. Imagine such power bent to defend, to protect and serve.

Many Lords have gone mad trying to be such a creature, and ended up wearing the simpler title. Others have howled in fear and denied that such a possibility existed, because that would mean they would lose followers, or have to look too long and hard at their own tendency to use compulsion unthinkingly. And in practice, Mr. Potter, there has often been little difference between the Light and the Dark Lords. Both could wield the magic of both sides, compulsion or free will. It is the allegiances they declared themselves for that made the difference, that and the strength of their magic.

I will tell you now, Mr. Potter, that I think you have a good possibility of becoming such a wizard, nameless right now, but committed both to his own freedom and that of others. I am trying to show others that that might also be your path. But I can only persuade, and that will take a long time. I will not force. I will not compel. I have used Dark magic unhesitatingly in the past, but not for this. The purpose is too high, the path too bright.

Two things you must know:

First, Dumbledore fears what you may become. He fears what it would mean if a mere boy of thirteen was able to do greater and more moral things than he can, because he fears looking too closely at the consequences of his own decisions. It is a fear all the Light Lords have had.

Second, do not trust Sirius Black.

Starborn.

Chapter Thirteen: Padfoot and Moony

“Harry?”

Harry hastily folded Starborn’s letter and put it in the pocket of his robe as Connor ducked into the Owlery. Harry shook his head and turned back to his task, binding the bundle he’d made around Hedwig’s leg as she balanced on her perch. When he was certain it wouldn’t fall off, he stepped back and met Hedwig’s golden eyes.

“Take this to Lucius Malfoy, girl, please,” he said softly.

Hedwig hooted at him, leaned forward to run a piece of his hair through her beak, and then took off, her wings sending up a mist of dust and feathers. Harry sneezed through it, and heard Connor sneezing behind him. Harry smiled. It was a peaceful moment enjoyed with his brother.

It didn’t last.

“Harry?” Connor asked, his voice thick with disbelief. “What are you doing sending gifts to Lucius Malfoy, of all people?”

Harry turned to face him. Godric, Connor’s black eagle-owl, was trying to get his attention from his perch, but Connor ignored him. His gaze was fixed steadily on Harry, his hazel eyes wide with disbelief and something that looked like betrayal. Harry sighed. He had become accustomed to that look on his brother’s face lately.

“Because I’m truce-dancing with him,” said Harry simply.

The puzzled expression on Connor’s face didn’t ease.

Harry muttered under his breath. “Isn’t Sirius teaching you anything?” he asked, irritated, as he pushed past Connor and turned towards the stairs. “He said that he would. You need to know about pureblood customs and history and honor in order to make a good leader.”

“He’s been teaching me in compulsion magic,” said Connor, voice gone cold, as he trailed Harry. “I thought you’d be proud of me, Harry.

This what I'm supposed to learn. I'm learning to fight, to survive in the war, to be the Boy-Who-Lived. What else do you want me to do?"

Harry turned around and leaned against the wall of the staircase. "Connor, what do you think will happen after the war?"

Connor's face went blank—not the practiced draining of expression that he had lately whenever Harry disagreed with him about Slytherins, but true confusion. "What do you mean? I know we'll win. Sirius told me that Light Lords have always defeated Dark Lords, and that's what he's training me to be, a Light Lord."

Harry stifled a shudder. He had suspected that, but he had a different idea of what the term might mean now, after reading Starborn's letter. "All right, so we win the war. And then what happens?"

Connor said, in the voice of someone still trying to understand what he was thinking about, "Well—I think that we'll put the Death Eaters in Azkaban." Harry held his tongue. His brother really wouldn't understand the contacts that Harry had among the former Death Eaters. "And then we'll heal people who were hurt in the war. And Dumbledore will probably make a speech." He shook his head. "I don't know. What do you think will happen after the war, Harry?"

Harry sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "I think that we'll have a lot of people to heal," he said. "And I think there will be people who resent us for winning. And there will be purebloods on our side, and purebloods who aren't. I think we'll have a lot of work to do, Connor, to put the wizarding world back together again. If you don't know pureblood history and customs, how are you going to do it? You'll have to send someone else to speak to them instead of coming yourself, and that's an insult."

"Harry, you think too much about this kind of thing!" Connor cried, and flung an arm around his shoulders. "Now, come on. Sirius said that you could sit in on my lesson today. Remember?"

Harry managed to hide his flinch. "Yes, right," he said.

He ought to be grateful, he told himself as they hurried down the stairs. He got to spend time with his brother today, and all the other people he could have spent it with—Draco, Flint, Luna, Neville, Zacharias, Justin—had understood, if reluctantly, that a day with his brother was a rare treat.

But Harry had hoped that Connor would want to spend at least part of the day flying or eating or playing a prank. He didn't want to sit and watch as compulsion magic was flung around for a few hours, then have to excuse himself because he was shaking and sick to his stomach with fear and revulsion.

As if reading his mind, Connor asked wistfully, "Harry, isn't there some way that you could become more comfortable with compulsion magic? For my sake? It's not a Dark gift, we know that now—"

"Remus would say it is," Harry interrupted. "You remember how he explained Light and Dark magic at the beginning of the year."

Connor shrugged. "Well, Remus was wrong. Are you going to believe him, or all the books that explain compulsion magic can be a Light gift, as long as the person who has it learns to control it?"

I got in trouble last year for trusting a book, Harry almost said, but stopped himself. Connor knew that all too well. He'd been possessed by Tom Riddle too, after all. "Can I read the book that explains what you are? You know, the goblin one?"

Connor blinked, then smiled. "Of course!" No doubt he was enthralled to see Harry finally interested in more than the disgusting aspect of compulsion magic.

Harry touched the letter in his pocket, and listened to the crinkle of parchment. Now that Starborn had given him an idea of what to look for, Harry really did want to read that book for himself, in the hopes that it would let him understand a little more of Starborn's cryptic natterings.

The goblins of the North have long proclaimed themselves different from the goblins of the South, who have been working and living among wizards since before the Norman Conquest. The goblins of

the North, on the other hand, have said that they would respect only a wizard who met a certain set of criteria...

“Very good, Connor!”

Harry blinked and glanced up. Connor and Sirius were across the room in the Shrieking Shack, and Connor had apparently just compelled a rabbit to hop straight into his hand. His brother was laughing in delight, and the rabbit was wildly struggling, fighting no visible pressure on his body.

Harry’s breath sped up, and his sight began to spin and narrow to a distant blur. He turned hastily, determinedly, back to Griphook Fishbaggin’s book. He could see why it fascinated Connor. It talked a lot about compulsion magic in vague and abstract terms, and mentioned good uses to which it had been put.

But it also praised free will in higher terms, and Harry wondered how that could have escaped his brother. Maybe he just hadn’t wanted to see.

That set of criteria has been variously and problematically defined, by both wizards and the goblins themselves. Following is a list of the words and phrases in Gobbledegook, the goblin tongue, that may be taken to refer to such a wizard.

Harry turned the page, and his mouth fell open. Connor hadn’t been kidding about the list of terms. Even the simplest had its own explanation, peppered with frequent question marks.

Halark mazkatin. This phrase nominally translates to ‘opener of doors,’ but it is a puzzle why the goblins would need a second phrase for it, as they have their own word for ‘porter.’ Also, the doors are supposedly not literal. What does this mean?

Kevnaz. This word simply means ‘seer.’ At least, so I believed for a long time. However, I have learned that the implication is of a non-goblin seer. (Much as we refer to ‘non-human’ magical creatures, so the goblins of the North refer to ‘non-goblins.’) Yet, at the same time,

do goblins believe that other species can even have true seers? I had not thought so.

And on and on it went, with Fishbaggin seeming almost as confused as Harry was beginning to be. He heard a throat clearing, and it took that to tear his attention away from the book. Connor stood in front of him, smiling slightly.

“Yes?” Harry asked, when his brother simply went on smiling at him, instead of doing something.

Connor shook his head, grinning. “Just wanted to see how long it would take you to say yes,” he said. “Sirius wants to talk to you about something. I’ll see you back at Hogwarts, all right?” He bounced towards the entrance to the tunnel that ran under the Whomping Willow and back towards school. Harry gave a bewildered nod to his brother’s back, then turned and looked at Sirius.

Sirius sat down on the bed beside Harry and put his head in his hands.

Harry tensed up at once. This was going to be another of the very worst sessions, then, the ones where Sirius cried and shook. Harry had dreaded them ever since the first time they happened, when he first visited the pair. Connor had simply stood in the background, an expression of sympathy on his face, as Sirius sobbed and told Harry how much he meant to him, he was his godson, he meant something to him, didn’t he see that? Harry had to respond with awkward apologies and attempts to explain his distance, none of which went over well with Sirius. Since that time, Connor had left them alone when they talked. He claimed, when Harry asked him, that godfather and godson needed time alone.

Harry somewhat doubted that. He, at least, didn’t need any time alone with the person Sirius had become, or was becoming.

Somewhat shocked by the bitterness of that thought, he was unprepared for Sirius to lift his head, wipe his eyes, and say, “Your parents sent me a letter, Harry. They’ve had Aurors questioning them. Aurors! The letter said they had a son called Harry Potter attending

Hogwarts, whom they didn't remember, and until an attempt to remove the spell on them worked, he was going to spend his time with a former Death Eater called Severus Snape. The letter said that their son had chosen Snape as his guardian, out of all the choices available."

Harry stared. Sirius had gone from shocky and shaky to furious. His eyes were glowing as they had when he attacked Snape in the Great Hall. His hands were clenched in front of him, and he was breathing fast. Harry felt his magic respond instinctively, pouring through the channels in his body, ready to raise barriers if Sirius attacked him.

"Why?" Sirius whispered. "Why Snape, Harry? Why do you want him? I'm at Hogwarts, and so is Moony. They sent along a copy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's letter. You could have chosen one of us. Why did you pick him?" The last word was a snarl.

Harry bared his teeth. So it's come down to this, then? Fine. He avoided it all summer, even after he knew. There's no reason to avoid it now. "Do you know why I put that spell on my parents, Sirius?"

"What spell, Harry?" Sirius demanded, leaning nearer. His teeth were bared in a dog's warning. "What did you do to them?"

"Fugitivus Animus Amplexor," said Harry, as calmly as he could with his godfather so close. He wanted to defend himself, he realized. He wanted to call Protego and keep the Shield Charm between them. He wanted Snape there.

Sirius stared at him, then shook his head. "That's not possible," he said. "The Aurors would have recognized and broken that spell."

Harry laughed. It didn't sound nice. It made Sirius's face crumple a little. "They would have had to use as much power to break the spell as I did in casting it," he said. "And I don't think any Auror is quite that strong, or even two or three of them working in combination."

There. He'd said it, admitted his own power aloud to Sirius for the first time. Let's see how he takes it.

"Harry," Sirius whispered, and the balance in the room tilted crazily, away from anger and back towards sorrow again. "What have you done? What have you become? What's happened to my little godson who used to watch Connor singing about Gryffindor and clap his hands?"

Harry drew in a deep breath. "That wasn't me," he said. "That was—that was your godson. That was who I was, who my parents made me into."

Sirius froze. Then he said, "What are you talking about, Harry? Lily and James never made you sing if you didn't want to."

Harry clenched his fists, rolled off the bed, and stood up. He could feel the air around him chilling, his rage and his power spreading. "You were a Gryffindor, Sirius. Do you have to be such a bloody coward?"

Shocked speechless, Sirius didn't manage to respond before Harry turned and started shouting at him. It felt damn good to shout, Harry realized. The rage around him wasn't exactly turning hot, but it did relax, and seemed less likely to reach out and turn something to ice.

"They hurt me, Sirius! And you knew that, after what my mother told you last year, and you let them do it anyway! They twisted and warped my mind and my magic, bound me and changed me into something I never would have been if not for them! I still don't really know why they did it, except that they needed a protector for Connor, and somehow they decided I'd do! But they should have helped protect him, too! They were the adults. You were the adults. You didn't act like adults, but you were! You should have known! Why the hell didn't you try to get me away from them, Sirius? Why did you treat me as if I'd done something wrong, just because I was Sorted into Slytherin? And now you're on me about choosing Snape for my guardian." Harry tried to laugh. It got caught in his throat. "Did you ever think that maybe I feel safe with him, because he tried to do something to help me, when you didn't do a bloody fucking thing to keep my parents away from me, Sirius? Not one bloody fucking thing!"

Sirius's face was ghost-white by the time Harry finished. It turned as gray as the Dementor's robes in the next instant. He shook his head.

"There are so many things you don't understand," he murmured. "So many things..." He abruptly broke off with a cry, as though someone had hit him, and fell over and huddled on the bed again.

Harry shut his eyes and turned away. There was no satisfaction to be had in yelling at someone so weak, and he could already feel guilt creeping in where the rage had been. Sirius hadn't actually been the one who hurt Harry. That was his parents. But Harry shuddered at the thought of facing them, because whatever he told them would affect his bond with Connor. They were Connor's parents, too.

Do you have to be so selfish?

Harry tilted his head to the side. That sounded like his mother's voice, and it was definitely coming from inside his mind—

Does everything have to revolve around you? Can't you learn that other people have suffered in their lives, too, and that your sufferings don't negate theirs or make them any less?

A flash of light and fire behind his eyes told Harry what this was. The phoenix web was reviving, perhaps stirred by his immense explosion of rage, and reaching out to take what it could of his thoughts.

His mother's voice continued, relentless. So you were trained to play the role of Connor's protector. Does that matter? There was a time when you would have fought everyone else off rather than give up that role. Does that mean that we should apologize for making you what you are, the person Snape and Draco admire? They would never have paid attention to you if you weren't the way you were, if you were just the Boy-Who-Lived's older brother.

Harry shook his head weakly. This couldn't—this wasn't true—

Your magic is only so strong because it was confined. When the confinement wears off, then you'll be back to the strength that you always had. And then you'll want your parents, your godfather, but

they'll have turned their backs on you, because you couldn't appreciate what you had while you had it. Do you want to be left all alone? It sounds like you're begging for that.

It sounded more and more like Lily as it went on, complete with the tearful recriminations on the end. Harry had heard her crying like that the few times as a child he tried to refuse his training, saying he was tired. Did he want Connor to die? She'd asked him that. Did he want his brother to lose his life because Harry didn't know how to perform an effective Shield Charm, because he would rather sleep than learn how to defend Connor against curses?

And every time, Harry had picked himself up and gone back to his books. He could be tired later. One of the books had expressed it best, giving part of a speech that a Light Lord defending against a Dark Lord six hundred years ago had spoken, and ending with Rest is for the dead.

Harry felt himself fall to his knees, but dimly. The phoenix web was spreading over his vision now, turning everything into a haze of fire and gold, tightening its hold on his mind. Thoughts that had seemed thinkable a moment ago were becoming less so. Why had he shouted at Sirius? What did it matter that Sirius hadn't confronted his parents about the way they treated him? Harry wouldn't have wanted him to. He would have been upset. And look what happened to Remus when he interfered. He had to become a sacrifice, too, or at least his memories did, for the good of the wizarding world.

You inflict such pain when you protest, pain on others and on your bonds with others. Do you want that? Do you want Connor to look at you with disgust someday? Do you want him to ask you whether you choose the Slytherins or him, and have you hesitate, and have him turn his back on you and the choice be lost forever? He's your brother. Draco is just your friend. How could you do this to him?

Harry cried out in misery, and heard footsteps abruptly hastening up the tunnel that led from the Whomping Willow.

"Harry? Sirius?"

Remus was in the room in the next moment, grabbing Harry and holding him close. Harry leaned his head on Remus's chest and stopped shaking. The phoenix web was retreating, pushed away by the presence of a person who obviously still cherished him, despite his daring to shout and use magic against other people.

Harry closed his eyes and fought to still the racing of his heart. He could feel Sirius and Remus exchanging glances over his head, and then heard them arguing, low-voiced. He could only catch splinters of their conversation through the pain and chaos in his head.

“..didn’t have to do that...”

“Snape as a guardian, Moony! Snape...”

“...has reasons...”

“...way of spending more time with us...”

“...what happened....”

“No way we can tell him what happened! No way...”

“Hush, Sirius, I know, I know. Let’s ask him.” Remus gently reached down and tilted up Harry’s chin, until Harry’s eyes were level with his. The werewolf gave him an equally gentle smile. “Harry,” he said conversationally, “did you know that I can run on full moon nights since I’ve started taking the Wolfsbane Potion?”

Harry blinked, trying to wrench his thoughts away from the consuming mix of guilt for his own actions and anger against his mother and Dumbledore for placing the phoenix web in his mind in the first place. “Really?” he asked cautiously. “I thought you still stayed—well, here, or in your office.”

Remus laughed gently. “Hardly! I’m a man in a wolf’s body now, able to roam and run without losing control of my instinct. Sirius transforms into Padfoot, and comes with me.” He hesitated for a moment, then nodded, as if he’d had to convince himself this was the right decision.

"And we'd like you to come with us. We run through the Forbidden Forest, mostly. I think it might be a good distraction for your magic."

Harry could imagine that it would be. The one thing he didn't want to think about was spending time with Sirius, after what Sirius had said to him.

But that wasn't really Sirius's fault, was it? You should have known better than to question him about that.

"All right," he whispered. "This full moon?"

Remus nodded enthusiastically. "Just one night, Harry. I don't know if you'd be up to running around all three nights, anyway." He smiled. "But you ought to see us. There's a—a wildness in the Forbidden Forest that I can sense when I'm not human. I think you'll enjoy it, too."

Harry swallowed several times. "All right," he whispered at last.

"Excellent!" Remus hugged him one more time and stood up. "Now, come on. I'm hungry, and want lunch."

Harry smiled at him and accompanied him out of the Shack. He knew Sirius was following them, but he didn't dare to look back. He was not sure if he would rush to Sirius in that moment, hug him, and beg his forgiveness, or try to strip his flesh from his bones with only the knife's edge of his magic.

Snape took one look at him when Harry came to help finish brewing the Wolfsbane that night and strode across the room, catching his chin and staring hard into his eyes. Harry averted his gaze and brought up his Occlumency shields.

He wouldn't understand, whispered the phoenix web. He wouldn't want to spare Sirius, would he? He hates Sirius. And you have to try to understand Sirius. It's obvious that something's happened to him. You have to try and understand, Harry. Everyone deserves a second chance.

"What happened?" Snape demanded, without letting Harry go.

"Nothing," Harry whispered.

"If you will not tell me, I cannot help you." Snape still didn't let him go.

Harry wanted to tell him. The temptation was strong, the words hovering on the tip of his tongue. But then Snape would get angry on his behalf, and storm and rage, and there would be another fight between Snape and Sirius, and this time Dumbledore might really sack Snape. How could Harry bear being the cause of that? He was barely standing the rush of memories that the phoenix web had brought back to him all day, of times when he'd hurt other people with his magic or his selfishness.

He cleared his throat. Snape waited, his eyes intent.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry whispered, and then wrenched himself free and walked over to one of the waiting cauldrons.

Snape's eyes cut holes in his back. Harry chopped and mixed and sliced, and went on doing so until he felt Snape move back to his own work. He let out a low breath.

"Do not imagine for one breath that I have forgotten this," Snape said then, voice soft and deadly. "And do not imagine for one moment that I do not know who is the cause of this."

Harry glanced up in panic, only to see Snape staring fixedly at a locked cupboard across the room. "Your parents," Snape whispered.

Harry sagged. No, it wasn't healthy to have Snape so angry at James and Lily, but at least they were in Godric's Hollow, not here at Hogwarts where Snape might harm them. "Yes," he said, as though agreeing.

Snape said nothing for the rest of the evening, except to direct Harry in the brewing of the potion. His gaze didn't often waver from the locked cabinet, no matter what he was doing. Harry wondered what was in there that was so interesting.

"Ready, Harry?" Sirius asked, now looking smiling and cheerful, much more his normal self.

Harry stood outside the castle, shivering slightly as a chill breeze cut through him. They were on the lawn in front of the Forbidden Forest, which loomed dark and black and oddly inviting. Overhead, the full moon blazed with rigid clarity, like bone that someone had set on fire.

Harry's gaze went briefly to the werewolf standing on the other side of Sirius. Remus didn't look exactly like a normal wolf when transformed, being longer in the jaw and leg. But his coat was gray, and he had his head lifted so that he could sniff the wind. And he hadn't attacked anyone yet. Harry found himself hoping that the same thing was happening to Hawthorn Parkinson, wherever she was. He had delivered the Wolfsbane Potion by owl a few days ago, since she had written him that it was too dangerous for her to come to Hogwarts. Harry wanted to imagine her taking it and then running through the woods, enjoying the strength and speed and power of her lupine body without the urge to kill anyone.

He turned to Sirius and nodded.

Sirius grinned, the devil-may-care grin that he used when he played a prank. "Don't worry if you can't keep up," he said softly. "That's not the point. Just run."

He transformed into the black dog, and barked once.

Moony tossed back his head and howled. Harry shivered. That sound was definitely not a normal wolf's voice. It had no trace of melancholy to it, only wild power.

Padfoot barked again, and then began to run forward. The werewolf's legs surged down, and then forward, and he sprinted into the woods a good distance ahead of Padfoot. The big black dog barked enthusiastically, still running.

Harry ran after them.

It was easy to keep up with them at first, even with the branches slapping and scraping at him. He leaped over the trail sometimes as it twisted and turned in front of him, and took advantage of the clear areas that Moony and Padfoot had left. But soon they were plunging through thick underbrush that snagged but didn't stop them, and Harry had to run behind them, trying to keep track of the plunging shapes. He could see Moony still speeding up, moving effortlessly, and knew from his own harsh panting that he couldn't go much longer.

Then his magic came out.

Harry felt it stir and take a deep breath, as though it liked the smells of the wild Forest night. Then it swept through his body, and sped his feet, and cooled his panting, and eased the stitch that had started to grow in his side. Harry felt it lift and beat like wings, the way he had only felt a few times. One of them had been in the battle with Voldemort at the end of first year, and he shuddered. That had not been far from where he was now running.

But this time, he was not in battle, and the magic was not angry or defensive, only silent and intent. He wanted to keep up with Moony and Padfoot. The magic knew that, and it was going to help him.

He felt himself skim through tangles that should have caught him, and wondered if he was actually flying through them, or if his magic had simply brushed them aside. He avoided roots and rocks that should have caught his feet, and sprang across small hollows that should have made him trip. He ran and he ran and he ran, and still his breath passed cleanly and easily out of his lungs. It made him feel like singing.

A trill of song passed above his head as if in answer. Harry lifted his head, and saw Fawkes flying there, his wings spread wide and his tail trailing like a comet's. Even through the darkness, Harry could feel the phoenix's eye on him. Fawkes sang again, and then rose and disappeared briefly behind the branches. Harry knew he was tracking him, though, could feel the bright presence moving along steadily at his right shoulder.

Then there came the sound of hooves, and centaurs were galloping as steadily opposite him. They did not say anything, but when Harry glanced at them, they nodded their heads once, in grave gestures of recognition. They reared in the next moment, and tore back into the Forest.

Other creatures replaced them, things that Harry recognized from his reading and others he didn't. He thought he saw a swift, two-legged thing that was not a bird, with grasping talons and claws on its feet big enough to tear a man in two. He knew at one point there were unicorns, running with their tails behind them like streams of starlight, their horns catching the full moon's every gleam in ways that brought tears to his eyes. He knew he saw the coiling shape of an immense snake, and the striding legs of what could have been giant spiders. None of them stayed long, except for Fawkes, whom Harry could still feel like a beacon above him. All of them moved alongside him for a short time, often making some brief gesture of invitation or recognition, and then plunged back into the darkness of the Forest.

Harry felt less and less fear as he ran. His magic spread around him, filling the Forest with familiarity if not with light. He ran contained within it, spinning along as if on a broom. But this was the exaltation he had always felt on a broom strengthened and deepened. He was not afraid even when he recognized the three-headed shape of a Runespoor slithering rapidly beside him, and he called out a greeting in its own tongue. The three heads turned towards him, gave three identical snaps in unison, and then guided the Runespoor back into the bushes.

Harry knew it would have to end at some point, and it did. He jerked to a stop in a clearing, his heart hammering and his head filled with gold that did not come from the phoenix web. He spun around in a circle, his hands above his head, laughing. He felt the light when Fawkes came spiraling down and landed on his shoulder with a rushing croon. He felt his magic spread out further, shaking its head like a wild horse, rearing and dancing, with no purpose to hurt or destroy, only play.

He felt it when Moony came to the edge of the clearing and jerked to a stop, his nose in the air and his attitude and posture stiff. Harry turned and looked towards him, still smiling.

The werewolf's brilliant amber eyes were staring at him. Harry was puzzled by them. He could see recognition in them, the same that the other magical creatures had seemed to show him, but why? It was not as though Moony didn't know who he was. Remus had been around Harry since he was a baby.

"Good show, Harry!"

Sirius was behind Moony, panting, human again, his body covered with scratches and his face freer than it had been in a long time. Harry found himself thinking that he ought to run through the Forbidden Forest every night, if it did him this much good. Moony turned away, the odd recognition disappearing from his eyes, and nudged at Sirius's hand.

Sirius scratched his ears, his eyes on Harry now. "How did you keep up with us?" he asked, with a smile in his voice that said he knew the answer already.

"Magic," said Harry at once. Fawkes shifted on his shoulder and rubbed his neck against Harry's, prompting Harry to raise a hand and scratch the golden feathers. They bristled with a pleasant heat, counteracting the chill of the late October air.

Sirius smiled and nodded. "Think you want to run on?"

Harry thought about it, but an immense yawn caught him, and he shook his head. Fawkes made a chirp of protest as that disturbed his perch on Harry's shoulder. "I think I'll go back in and go to bed," he said. The air still thrummed with magic, but it had calmed down now. Harry decided he would sleep better with the memory of peace and wonder still untaxed, rather than exhausting himself. "See you tomorrow, Sirius, Remus." He nodded to the werewolf.

Moony's ears came up, and he stared hard at Harry. Harry shrugged and eased past them, back through the Forest. The walk was still

light and easy, though far slower than it had been earlier. Harry supposed he ought to worry about some creature of the Forest possibly confronting and hurting him on the way back.

None of them did, though Harry did sometimes see signs of movement off the path, indicating he had an escort again. Maybe that was due to Fawkes, who showed no sign of moving from his perch on Harry's shoulder. Harry reached the entrance of the castle, and still Fawkes didn't move. Harry reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room, and paused to look at the phoenix again. Fawkes put his head on one side and watched him calmly back, with one eye.

"Won't Dumbledore be wondering where you are?" Harry asked.

Fawkes gave a cheerful trill. Harry couldn't translate it the way Dobby would have, but he recognized the tone: don't care.

Harry thought back to his last visit to Dumbledore's office. The phoenix hadn't been there. Maybe Dumbledore wouldn't worry at that.

"All right," he said, with a shrug that Fawkes reprimanded him for, and whispered, "Dignatio verus," to the wall. It opened, and Harry made his way to the third-year boys' bedroom. He saw a slight shift that was Draco relaxing into sleep. Harry had told him where he would be tonight, but the other boy had waited up for him anyway.

Fawkes fluttered from Harry's shoulder to the top of his canopy while he put on his pyjamas and brushed his teeth, but then insisted on coming inside the hangings with him and perching on the edge of his bed, radiating warmth.

"Cuddly thing, aren't you?" Harry muttered, and closed his eyes.

Fawkes began to sing, softly enough that Harry didn't think he was disturbing anyone else. He fell asleep contentedly, and for once, when phoenix music twined with his dreams, he wasn't frightened of it. Albus Dumbledore stood at his window, hands clenched hard on the sill. He could see the full moon from here, and he knew that underneath it somewhere, Sirius and Remus were running, as well as

other werewolves, some tame, some not. It was not that which had disturbed him.

Magic had brought him out of bed. Magic had jerked him awake. Albus could have slept through any of the ordinary small flares that were the professors performing spells, or a first-year's accidental magic escaping his control. But this was something else, a deep and booming symphony that had raised a thousand thousand voices in response to it. The Forbidden Forest was still stirring, not like a hornet's nest but like some sleek and beautiful creature awakened after a long sleep.

And about to go hunting, Albus thought, and shivered. This was the first song of a deeper threat than Voldemort was. He knew that Voldemort would be defeated, thanks to the prophecy. Harry might easily raise his voice and rouse so many answers that something altogether different would happen, something that would rock the foundations of the very wizarding world. And when foundations rocked, people died.

He must bind the boy again. It was the only answer. He had thought that the subtle strengthening of the phoenix web he had been doing lately would work, but if Harry's magic was as free as this, it was a sign that the web had weakened once more.

He turned to go back to bed, giving Fawkes's empty perch a frown along the way. Granted, the phoenix had been gone for long periods of time before, but it wasn't like him to stay away when Albus could have used the company.

Chapter Fourteen: Detention With Draco

Clink.

Albus sighed and straightened his back as the last link in his trap was placed. It wouldn't be possible to use it until tonight—the devices needed time to adapt to the spells he'd placed on them, and Harry would need to be in his rooms, sleeping, which would happen for sure after the Halloween Feast—but he doubted that anyone would discover it before then. He had commanded the house elves to place the devices in out-of-the-way spots, and of course, since he was Headmaster of Hogwarts, they had obeyed him gladly and swiftly.

He waved a hand to dismiss the hovering window through which he'd observed the trap placement, and then sat down heavily behind his desk, to once more mourn that such a trap had been necessary. If Harry had only listened to his mother's words in his mind yesterday, coming from one of the unmodified devices, Albus would not have had to do this.

If Voldemort had not done what he did the night he attacked Godric's Hollow, you would have no reason to worry about this at all.

Albus nodded his head, once, in determination, and then straightened. It was useless wishing for the present to turn back and change the past, and he had lived long enough to know exactly how powerless regrets were.

He swept from the room, then, to prepare for the Halloween Feast, giving Fawkes's perch only one irritated glance along the way.

"Draco, what is wrong with you?"

Draco turned around and relaxed a little. Harry was fine, though he looked windblown from Quidditch practice; the first game, against Gryffindor, was on Saturday, and Flint had been drilling all his team hard. Flint had also forbidden Draco from coming to watch the practice, claiming that he distracted Harry. Draco didn't think that was true, and even if he had, would have determined it fair payment for the way that he worried whenever Harry was out of sight.

Today, though, his jumpiness and twitchiness had increased, and he didn't know why. He just shook his head and reached down to touch a piece of Harry's hair that was sticking straight up from his head, grinning. Harry swatted his hand away with a practiced motion and shook his head.

"I'm going to go to the library and study with Neville," he announced, ducking down to pick up his bag from the floor.

"Good," said Draco, swinging down to collect the Transfiguration book he'd laid beside the bed. "I'll come with you."

Harry gave him a long look. "Zacharias will probably be there too," he said. "There's really no need for me to have an escort to the library, Draco."

Draco's nervousness spilled out his mouth before he could stop it. "Yes there fucking well is, Harry, and you know it." He strode up to Harry and pushed his hair back. The lightning bolt scar was inflamed, but not bleeding. Draco managed to hide his surprise and rally before that ruined the point he wanted to make. "Someone might try to attack you at any time."

"Somehow I think the Headmaster has better things to do than lurk around corners and wait for me, Draco," said Harry, and his magic swirled and grumbled.

"I don't."

Harry shook his head. "Fine. Come if you want to. But I don't enjoy the feeling that I'm keeping you from your homework. You know Potions as well as I do. Poor Neville doesn't, though, and that's what I'll be tutoring him in." He turned determinedly towards the door down to the common room.

"That's why I'll be studying something else," said Draco, and stifled a laugh as he saw Harry's flush. The poor boy does hate being embarrassed.

The further they walked away from the Slytherin common room, the better Draco felt—until they ascended the stairs into the entrance hall and he felt it again, a buzzing and nagging against his nerves, building to a pain like a beesting on his right temple. Draco turned to the right, and the beesting moved until it seemed to hit him in the face. Draco narrowed his eyes, staring hard at the tiny alcoves and doors scattered around the Great Hall. Where is that coming from? What is it?

“Draco?”

Draco could hear Harry tapping his foot, but he ignored him for the moment. If he had a way to get rid of his jumpiness, then yes, he would take it. He slunk forward, and finally traced the buzzing and the pain to a small door that was probably a broom closet. He found it hard to concentrate on. Notice-Me-Not spells seemed to be worked into the wood. After a moment, though, he grasped the door and swung it open.

The buzzing wrongness focused on the one odd object in the closet: a silver Pensieve, sitting on the floor and wound with glowing golden runes. Draco frowned. There was something wrong with the Pensieve’s magic, something twisted away from the usual purpose, but he couldn’t figure out what it was just from looking. He would have to touch it.

“Draco, don’t.”

Harry was holding his shoulder with one hand, and his other extended his wand when Draco looked. His expression had gone flinty. Draco stared in fascination. It was the first time he had seen open anger on Harry’s face without an explosion of magic following that made him drop into a fetal position from the headache. The ferocity suited Harry better than the whimpering weakness that had afflicted him this summer, he thought.

“Why not?” Draco asked. “I know that’s what’s bothering me, Harry.”

“I don’t feel anything,” said Harry stubbornly.

"You haven't been trained like I have," said Draco, as kindly as he could. "And even then, you're so powerful that your magic shields you from tiny influences like these. This is subtle. But I know it's been making me jumpy, or part of it." He brushed Harry's now-hesitant hand from his shoulder and walked forward, kneeling to stick his head into the Pensieve.

"Draco!" came Harry's anguished cry, and he heard feet running.

Then the memory swallowed him.

Draco blinked and glanced around. He knew for a fact that he didn't recognize this place. It was a small, neat room, with wizarding pictures on the walls that displayed an unfamiliar series of scenes, mostly grassy fields with the grass rippling in the wind. The chairs sat close around a cozy hearth, which in Malfoy Manor would have been twice as big, and a bookcase packed tight with books stood along one wall. A staircase off to his left led upwards, and Draco supposed there must be more rooms up there. He shivered. The house would be claustrophobically small if there weren't.

"Now, Harry, recite the names of the seven defensive kinds of curse for me."

Draco turned, and his breath caught in his throat and turned to glue. Behind him, near a couch, were two figures he recognized, despite not having studied them closely. One was Lily Potter, whom he'd briefly met in Dumbledore's office last year. Her face was worn and lined, her mouth set as she stared down at the child balancing on a chair next to her.

The other was Harry, Harry at perhaps five or six years old, with his glasses already in place and his eyes on the book that he held. At his mother's words, however, he shut the book and began to recite obediently.

"Shielding curses, mirror curses, dream curses..."

Draco recognized the names of only those first two types of defensive curse. The others he'd never heard of. Harry recited them flawlessly, and then sat with his eyes on his mother's face and waited.

Draco felt slightly sick when he realized Harry was looking at his mother the way a Crup looked at its master for approval. And Lily gave him what he wanted, with a nod and a smile and a motion of her hand that came damn near being a pat on the head. Harry beamed. Then Lily stood and backed to the far side of the room. Harry sat where he was at a subtle gesture from her.

She has him well-trained, doesn't she? Draco thought, anger burning like bile in the back of his throat.

"Now," said Lily, "pretend that I'm casting spells at you. This is a battle to save Connor's life. Connor is behind you and to the right." Harry's eyes half-shut, and Draco knew he was envisioning it. "Tell me what kind of defensive curse you would use to stop each kind of spell."

She drew her wand and moved it in a half-circle. "Reducto!"

The spell did not actually shoot towards Harry, but Harry tensed as if it had and said, "A mirror curse. Then you'd have to deal with your own Reducto reflected back twice or three times."

Lily nodded. "That will do. Consopio!"

"A dream curse," said Harry, "to arrest the sleep in mid-motion and throw it back to you."

Lily tilted her head briefly to the left. "Acceptable, if you think you could really catch my spell and throw it."

Harry lifted his head slightly, his eyes gleaming. Draco would have expected him to smile, but his face remained silent and intent. "Can I try?" he asked softly.

Lily nodded. "Consopio!"

The sleeping spell had barely left Lily's wand when Harry held up a hand and shouted, "Speculum Consopio!"

A milky substance formed in front of Harry, bouncing the spell so fast that Draco was still blinking when he realized Lily had sprawled out on the floor and gone to sleep. Harry hopped off his chair, ran to her, and lightly touched her cheek. Lily stirred and woke, staring at her son. “I thought you said you would use a dream curse, rather than a mirror curse,” she murmured.

“I thought I would, too,” said Harry. “But I think a mirror curse works better with that particular spell.” He was smiling, and Draco stared. That certainly transformed his face.

Lily stood up, and the smile evaporated as Harry watched his mother. “Tell me why you changed your mind,” Lily said, in a tone of quiet iron that Draco had never heard even his mother use. Well, maybe the time I chased fairies all through the eastern rose garden and broke most of the flowers, he thought.

“Because I—“ Harry stopped, chewing his lip.

“The truth, Harry,” said Lily, still in that iron voice.

“Partially because I thought it really was a good idea,” said Harry, bowing his head. “And partially because—well, does it matter if a Death Eater is asleep or asleep and having nightmares? They still couldn’t chase us.”

“They do deserve to suffer for attacking your brother,” Lily said, sinking to her knees in front of Harry. “That is the way you have to think, Harry.”

“But I thought being nice was a good thing.” Harry sounded timid, fragile, unsure. Draco wished he could do something to change this, but morbid fascination—and furious curiosity about why this Pensieve had been placed in the broom closet—made him keep watching.

“It is,” said Lily gently. “For your brother. Connor is the one who has to remain innocent to defeat Voldemort, Harry. Remember, I told you about that last week? Connor has to show mercy.”

Harry nodded, his eyes half-lidded, as though he were trying to recall a difficult lesson, or a dream that insisted on escaping his grasp. Draco had to swallow bile again.

"But you have to be strong," said Lily, and then put her hand beneath her son's chin and tilted his head up so that his green eyes met hers. They were almost the same shade of green, Draco thought, and wanted to believe that was the only similarity he could see between their faces. "That means that if an enemy comes up to you and tries to hurt you, you have to be willing to hurt them back. If someone tries to kill you, then you have to be willing to kill them. Or Connor will die before he's eleven years old. Do you want your brother to die?"

"No," Harry whispered.

Lily hugged him. "And I know that you don't want to kill him through inaction, either. Just keep this in mind, Harry. Anyone could turn out to be an enemy. Almost everyone, except the Gryffindors and the known pureblood families who serve the Light, could be a traitor or a Death Eater. So you've got to be careful. I know that you'll make friends when you go to school, but you have to be careful around them all the time. And if one of them says something bad about Connor, or tries to hurt him, then you'll have to hurt them back."

Draco wanted to step out of the Pensieve, but not strongly enough to resist watching the rest of the memory. It's a wonder that he didn't hex me for the first remark I made about his brother. It's a wonder that he's in Slytherin and seems to like it. It's a miracle that he has any sense of compassion left.

"I know," said Harry, and he looked and sounded solemn.

"Other than that," Lily said softly, "you are doing very well, Harry. You have just that little bit left to learn. Connor comes first, always and forever. When you've learned that, then I'll never worry about him again. I know that you'll be there, protecting him against all his enemies, and making them hurt if they try to hurt him." She touched a hand to his forehead, resting it over the lightning bolt scar. "Connor has mercy and compassion. You'll have to be justice, Harry, and sometimes the executioner."

Harry nodded at her, and then the memory trembled to a stop, and Draco knew that it was ended. He wrenched himself backwards with a gasp, and then kicked viciously at the Pensieve. The golden runes on the sides were hissing like Harry's snake had done last year, but they quieted when the silvery liquid of the thoughts inside splashed out and ran across them, dousing their glow.

Draco turned towards Harry. He had one hand pressed to his temple and was breathing harshly. He opened his eyes, but they had gone half-glossy.

"What are you hearing?" Draco whispered.

"My mother's voice," Harry whispered back. "Telling me that I have to be justice, I have to be executioner, because Connor is the gentle and merciful one." He gritted his teeth, and Draco wondered if it was against pain, real or remembered, or to make himself speak the next words. "I can hear them repeating over and over in my head. The phoenix web is coming back."

Draco gave a sharp glance at the Pensieve, knowing now how that was possible. Then he grabbed Harry's shoulders and lowered him gently to the floor. Harry was panting as though he fought an enemy, and Draco could feel his muscles jumping like a nervous unicorn's.

"It's all right," Draco whispered. "It's just a memory, Harry, and she can't hurt you. And you've already protected other people than Connor. You protected me from Ron's hexes last year. You protected Luna from being bullied. You've protected Neville from failing in Potions. You got between Granger's wand and me in the library the other day. You protect and shield all kinds of people. You show mercy and compassion all the time." His own heart was pounding, and he wished suddenly that his mother was there. He knew he could soothe Harry, since he'd done it this summer, but Narcissa could soothe him, and make him as strong as he needed to be for Harry.

"But that's different," Harry whispered. "Wrong. I shouldn't have done that, not when Connor needed me." To Draco's horror, he looked up with that glint in his eyes that Draco had hoped was gone forever, the

one that said he was sorry and valued Draco's friendship, but expected it to be dropped any moment. "I need to go find him."

Draco started to respond, and felt several sharp buzzing pains center on his face. There must be other Pensieves, he thought. That's why I'm feeling them now. And we've triggered the trap, or maybe disrupting this one Pensieve did, and they're all focusing on Harry and trying to put him back under the phoenix web.

Draco told Harry, "Stay here," rather unnecessarily—he didn't think Harry could have moved—and then rushed out of the room and turned his face in the direction of the pain. It was like facing into a stinging wind, but he found the source of the problem almost at once. There was a Pensieve in a closet on the other side of the hall. Draco kicked it over without bothering to glance into it and see what memory it held.

Then he tracked the pain into the dungeons, and kicked over two Pensieves in a corridor near the Slytherin common room. There was one near the Potions classroom, and another near Snape's office. They'd formed as much of a circle around Harry as possible, Draco thought as he soaked his shoe kicking over the sixth one. When he lay in his bed that night, probably, they would have sprung into motion, and he would have been overwhelmed and buried by the onslaught of memories.

The buzzing pain was quite faint by now. Draco breathed a sigh of relief and turned towards the stairs out of the dungeons. He thought the final one would be near the Great Hall. He could disrupt it, and then—

The Headmaster was standing down the corridor, watching him.

Draco took a deep breath and plastered a smile across his face. "Hello, Headmaster, sir," he said. "I didn't know you went walking in the dungeons. It's a good place for a chill morning walk."

"You have been disobedient, Mr. Malfoy," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand. "And I think that you have earned yourself—"

Draco let out another sigh of relief as he felt the magic that erupted from behind Dumbledore, bathing him in the scent of roses on flowing crystalline waves. The air brightened and turned sweet, and then Harry stalked around Dumbledore, who had frozen the moment the magic broke free, and faced the Headmaster. Draco couldn't see the expression Harry wore. He didn't think he needed to. The way that Dumbledore's face blanched was enough.

"How dare you do this?" Harry whispered. "How dare you try to hurt him?" His magic climbed, but still the sensations Draco felt were mostly light and sweetness. He shrugged, deciding not to question the change. It was more pleasant than the pain he usually felt when Harry was angry. "Would you have hexed him or tried to kill him, the way you did Peter?"

Peter? Draco thought, and decided that was one of the things that he would ask Harry about later. Right now, he didn't think it was a good idea to ask Harry anything.

The Headmaster, of course, was the kind of fool who would try, and who, moreover, would paste on a scolding look as he watched Harry. "Harry," he said mildly, "you know that what I was doing was only for your own good. The Pensieves would have tamed your magic and made you able to think of your brother kindly again. I know that you have been having arguments. This would soothe them."

"I want to be able to choose the arguments I have, thank you, Professor," said Harry. Draco watched ice glazing the stones under his feet. "And that still doesn't explain what you were going to do to Draco."

"Harry, my dear boy, I was only going to assign him detention." Dumbledore fixed Draco with that same mildly scolding glance. "Disrupting my measures to help you the way he has done deserves missing the Halloween Feast, I think."

Draco stuck his tongue out at the old man. He was sure that the punishment would have been much harsher if Harry hadn't interfered.

He saved me again, he realized then. He might not like to think of it that way, but he does keep getting between people who aren't his brother and harm.

"I want detention with him," said Harry.

"But, my dear boy, you have not done anything wrong," said Dumbledore. "At least, you have not broken school rules. You have been morally wrong, and that is a blow to your relationship with your brother that it might take a long time to recover from, but nonetheless—"

He shut up then. Draco edged a step to the right, and caught a glimpse of Harry's face. Yes, I would have shut up, too.

"Really?" Harry asked darkly. "I think attacking the Headmaster ought to do nicely." He raised both hands.

His magic bulged and rippled around him, and then turned abruptly sideways. Draco felt a wind pulling and tugging on him, causing him to move a step closer to Harry. But it let him go almost at once, and lashed out, focusing on Dumbledore. Draco watched in confusion. Was Harry just trying to make the Headmaster trip and stumble over his robes?

No, he wasn't, Draco realized after a moment. The wind wasn't physical, and it was blowing towards Harry, not away.

It was pulling on Dumbledore's magic, tearing pieces of it away from him and merging them into Harry's power.

Draco felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. That would be pretty terrifying, if it was focused on me, he thought, with a haze of both fear and contentment in his mind, and then pressed closer to Harry's back so that he could watch. The sensation was what counted, the rippling waves of power and how they ceased to exist as separate entities the moment they hit the magic around Harry, but the look on Dumbledore's face was well worth watching.

It ended soon enough. Dumbledore set up a barrier of some kind, and the magic ceased to flow. Draco hugged Harry, and sniffed roses as his magic bounced back and rippled around him. Harry let out a harsh breath.

"That, Mr. Potter, was a serious magical crime, and not merely a breach of the school rules," said Dumbledore. His voice was mild. His eyes were not. Draco supposed this was a glimpse of the White Wizard who had taken the field against Grindelwald. He found himself shivering.

"And what would you call attempting to bind the mind and magic of a child, Professor Dumbledore?" Harry's voice was absolutely level, but Draco could feel the fine tremors that ran through his body. "What would you call trying to reinforce the phoenix web in my mind long after I had said I did not want it back? What would you call trying to kill another man who was only trying to shield me?" His voice was building, and so was his magic. The stones between him and Dumbledore were ice-covered, and in the silence between Harry's shout and his next whisper, one of them shattered, shards falling to the ground from the immense stress the ice was putting it under. "I want you dead," Harry whispered, and Draco felt his rage join the magic, filling the corridor with the unbearable pressure of an angry wizard. Draco grimaced. Now the sensations of his magic felt like pain again.

Dumbledore did not strike back. Draco didn't know why. Perhaps he thought even now that he could use Harry, or perhaps he would rather have Harry angry and half-free than opposing him in magical battle. Draco could understand that. Instead, he only inclined his head and said, "Both of you will miss the Halloween Feast tonight. Your detention is to pick up branches and leaves off the lawn. You may not use magic." Then he turned and walked away.

There was a moment when Draco thought Harry would strike at his back. Harry's magic trembled, fighting the leash he had it on, and then collapsed abruptly into him. Harry shook his head and leaned back against Draco.

"Thank you," he said.

"I think that you're mistaking who those words should go to," said Draco, running his hands over Harry's shoulders. He couldn't seem to stop touching him. The magic was probably responsible for that, he thought, and then shook his head and set Harry gently back on his feet.

"I mean it," said Harry, and glanced back at him. "For all of it. For finding the Pensieves and kicking them over." His hands clenched in front of him briefly. "The phoenix web was coming back yesterday, and it was my mother's voice that spoke to me. That must have been why it was happening. And I want to thank you for being here and holding me back. I could have killed Dumbledore." He turned fully to face Draco. "And I want to thank you for not being afraid," he said softly, "when you found out that I could drink magic."

"Did you know?" Draco asked.

Harry hesitated briefly, then admitted, "I think I swallowed part of Voldemort's power in the Chamber of Secrets last year. But it wasn't something I've ever tried consciously to do. So no, I didn't." His eyes were back on Draco's face, studying it closely. "But you aren't frightened."

"It wasn't my magic that you were trying to swallow," said Draco, puzzled as to why this was such a large deal for Harry. "It would be like being afraid of you because you're a Parselmouth, Harry. So long as you aren't drinking my magic or setting a snake on me, there's no reason for me to fear it."

Harry abruptly embraced him, his body trembling violently. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Draco gave up on arguing that he owed Harry thanks, and just hugged him back. The pain was retreating from his head, the ice was retreating from the corridor, and Harry's magic now merely draped his back like a warm blanket. Draco couldn't feel any commands from it. If it wanted him to keep holding Harry, then he was more than happy to oblige.

Harry sighed and stooped down to pick up another branch. The wind really had been brisk this weekend, and individual leaves from the Forbidden Forest had colonized the Quidditch Pitch until it looked as if it were growing a second kind of grass. The branches were almost worse, because of how quickly they usually broke when he picked them up.

Harry half-grimaced to himself. You just aren't used to doing chores without magic, he thought, as he carried his latest armful to the edge of the Pitch. Dumbledore hadn't told them to put the leaves and branches in any one particular place, so they'd chosen this one and hoped the wind didn't start blowing again before they finished their detention.

Harry added his armful to the pile and turned to study Draco. Currently, he was chasing a leaf and trying to pick it up without dropping the rest of what he held in his arms. Harry thought it was a doomed effort, considering how many twigs he clutched. A small rain of them already followed his feet.

He'd thought as carefully as he could about the detention and the process of the detention to avoid thinking about what had got them the detention in the first place. He'd attacked Dumbledore, and somehow, both he and Draco were still alive and free. His head hurt like mad, but the phoenix web was a glittering mass that shifted under the surface of his mind, not the whole of it. Harry knew Dumbledore would likely try again, but at least this plan had failed.

And Draco had saved him. And then Draco had not been afraid of him when Harry had struck out and sucked part of Dumbledore's power away.

Those were facts so wonderful that Harry felt he couldn't let his mind fully touch them. His thoughts kept skittering around them and then returning, peering as warily at them as he had looked into the final Pensieve before kicking it over. He kept expecting to awake and find it a dream, that Draco had defended him so fiercely and accepted his fierce defense in return.

That is not something that would have happened with Connor, his thoughts told him abruptly. Connor couldn't protect you like that, not against Dumbledore, and you know that he would be afraid of you.

Harry shook his head. He didn't want to compare his relationship with Draco to his relationship with his brother right now. He just wanted to think about Draco by himself—

And perhaps laugh when he dropped the next handful of twigs, which happened in the next moment. The integrity of the bundle in Draco's arms was completely disrupted, and Harry laughed as it slid through Draco's frantically grasping hands and left him with a few leaves and one twig.

Draco flung down the leaves and the twig and stamped his foot at him. "I don't see you helping," he declared.

Harry started to walk towards him, and then paused when he saw a flash of movement near the pile of branches. He recognized the lifted, twitching nose and hairless tail in a few moments. Peter was there, in rat form, and wanted to speak with him. Harry let out a slow breath. He hadn't seen Peter in the school, not even on the Marauder's Map, since the attack by Dumbledore. Dumbledore had probably strengthened the wards so Peter couldn't enter again.

But would Draco understand this?

Harry swallowed and turned towards his friend. "Draco," he whispered, catching his attention in a moment. "Please, will you cover for me? There's someone I have to talk to."

Draco didn't laugh. His eyes were deep as they stared into Harry's. "Who is it?" he asked.

Harry let out his breath. "Peter Pettigrew."

"You have the strangest friends, Harry," said Draco, a little too calmly. "Not including me, of course. But yes, I'll cover for you. If you'll just leave an illusion of yourself here, it shouldn't be hard."

The edge to his voice said he would demand an explanation later, but Harry didn't mind. His heart was singing with relief. He waved a hand, and an illusion of him formed and stooped to gather up a stick. His hand passed through it, but Harry thought it would take a lot to notice.

"Of course, it doesn't actually help," Draco bemoaned it.

Harry looked hesitantly at him. Draco waved him on. "Go talk to him. The sooner you go, the sooner you can get back and tell me all about it."

Harry nodded to him and slipped around the leaf-pile, following the rat's tail further and further into the grass. Peter didn't transform until they were almost to the Forbidden Forest, and when he did, he sat with his back against a tree and stared intently at Harry.

"I think you can know why Dumbledore made me be your parents' Secret-Keeper now," he said softly.

Interlude: To Narcissa, To Lucius

November 1st, 1993

Dear Mother:

I'm very, very afraid that Dumbledore is going to hurt Harry if this keeps happening. And I've managed to protect him so far, but I don't know what to do now. I can't fight the Headmaster spell to spell, and now he's tried to use magic on Harry.

So far, I know that he and Harry had some kind of fight in late September, though I don't know what it was about, and Harry wound up in the hospital wing. I was still considering the information you sent me then, so I couldn't go and see his wounds without exposing myself to his magic and risking (as I thought) compulsion. And just yesterday Dumbledore tried to set some kind of trap with Pensievers for Harry, and would have hurt me when I found out about it and managed to disrupt it by kicking the Pensievers over. Harry protected me, and drained part of the Headmaster's magic.

I saw one of the memories in the Pensievers. It was horrible. His mother was testing him on types of defensive curses and telling him he had to hurt anyone who hurt his brother. What kind of witch does that? What kind of mother does that? A Mudblood, that's who! It goes against all the pureblood tests that you taught me about this summer. You don't test children until they're ready!

What can I do, Mother? Is there anything you can do? I know that you can't really reach out and protect Harry from so far away, but you said you wouldn't let anything happen to him if I chose him. So, please, give me advice. I'm so worried for him. His scar bleeds and he has nightmares and he doesn't tell me half the things I need to know, even though he's my friend. And his brother scares me. Please help.

Your beloved son,

Draco.

November 1st, 1993

Well, really, Lucius. I expected better of you than this. So far you've traded a few truce gifts with a child who will perish the moment the Dark Lord takes the field, pretending to believe that this child is a wizard of serious power, and played at finding out a way around the Potter wards. Did I not know your true dedication to our cause, I would say you are playing both sides, trying to find a way to keep your wife and son happy while still serving our Lord. How like a Slytherin.

Very well, then. It would seem that I must get your attention in another way. Slytherins also like dramatics, if I recall my own days at school correctly.

Your son Draco drinks pumpkin juice for breakfast every morning, no matter what else there is to drink. He laughs with Harry Potter as if the world were never going to change. He reads too much late at night and thinks no one notices when he yawns in his classes. He watched the Slytherin Quidditch practices until the Captain, Flint, told him to leave. He cares more for the safety of this child you are truce-dancing with than he does for his own.

I can reach him at any moment, Lucius. I can snuff the life from him. Unless you make clear your dedication to our cause and send me, in the vial this owl has also brought you, three drops of your blood to help with our Lord's awakening, the boy's life will be forfeit no later than Yule.

I see him every day, Lucius, and I am not someone whom other people pay attention to. It would not be hard to kill him.

You have a day to send the drops of blood to me, and a week to find out a way to enter Godric's Hollow, despite the wards. Then you will involve yourself more deeply in our cause, and go on involving yourself. There will a test of your dedication at Yule.

I trust you will have a pleasant day, Lucius, warmed by the thought of your son continuing to breathe.

Chapter Fifteen: Soldier In a Silent War

"The phoenix web is returning," Harry warned Peter as he sat down on the grass in front of him. "I'm not sure how much I'll be able to hear before it burns my thoughts up again."

Peter's eyes narrowed, but he didn't waste time speaking against Dumbledore. He simply nodded. Then he said, "Harry, I mentioned Regulus Black the last time we had a proper conversation."

Harry blinked. "I remember."

Peter leaned forward. "Regulus Black was Sirius's younger brother," he said. "Not much younger. A year between them. They were close friends before Hogwarts."

Harry tightened his hands in front of him. "I'll repeat what I said then," he said, as calmly as he could. "Why would they keep something like that concealed from me? Sirius could have forged a closer bond with me by telling me he was an elder brother like I was, or that he had been. And—and from the way I understand them now, they wouldn't have let an opportunity like that pass. They wanted to control me, bind me close to them, and that would have been a great chance."

"They are your parents and godfather, Harry," said Peter. "Does it make it easier to talk about them, and the wrong they've done you, when you don't acknowledge that?"

Harry clenched his hands again, and felt his hands begin to bleed like his scar. "It makes it possible for me not to wish death on them," he said.

Peter's eyes sharpened, and he nodded again. "Then we'll talk about them as 'they,' Harry," he said. "And I'll tell you why they wouldn't admit that Regulus existed."

"As I said, he and Sirius were close friends before Hogwarts. But then Sirius came to Hogwarts and was Sorted into Gryffindor. Suddenly he'd broken all the traditions that his family was supposed to keep. The Blacks had been Slytherins for as long as the family existed. All

Sirius's cousins had gone into that House. And Sirius was the elder son of the major branch of the family. I know that doesn't matter to a line like the Potters, but to a pureblood family like the Blacks, it did matter. A great deal."

Harry nodded. "But Sirius told me that he was an only child, and that was why his parents were so angry with him," he whispered. "They had no heirs after he rejected their ideals."

"They had Regulus," said Peter quietly. His eyes were staring past Harry, seeing into a time that Harry now suspected he didn't know the tiniest shard of truth about. "But he was the younger son. He couldn't quite ever make up for the loss of Sirius, no matter what he did, even though he was Sorted into Slytherin and believed in the same ideals that they did."

Harry felt himself give a shudder of revulsion. Imagine if our parents had favored me just because I'm the elder and ignored or devalued Connor because he was born fifteen minutes after me. What an idiocy!

Then he remembered that they had, seemingly, ignored and devalued him for not being the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry swallowed and caged the grief and pain. There has to be a reason for that. I don't know everything yet.

"All right," he said, harshly, because he needed to get his mind off those disturbing thoughts somehow. "Say I believe you. Say that Regulus did exist, and that Sirius lost him to his parents just like his parents lost Sirius to the wizarding world. Then what happened?"

"Regulus became a Death Eater," said Peter quietly, and met Harry's eyes again. "But—and I'm only reporting this secondhand, understand, because Sirius never told all the details to anyone—something went wrong. Something...changed his mind, I guess. Or he just decided that he was tired of being ordered around. He stole something very important to the Dark Lord and ran. I never knew what it was. I was never that close to the Dark Lord. My importance was all borrowed from Sirius." He glanced away, but not before Harry

saw many complicated emotions twisting in his face, hatred and love and bitterness and weariness.

“And he got away?” Harry asked. “Or he died?”

“Voldemort,” said Peter, visibly forcing himself to say the name, “caught him. And then he bound Sirius’s mind to his brother’s. He could do that, because of the blood connection. He forced Sirius to witness the way Regulus suffered while he tortured him.”

Harry buried his head in his hands, breathing hard. The mere thought of watching Connor suffer in his mind made him want to kill something.

“Sirius was going crazy,” said Peter, his voice as distant as the moon. “None of the Blacks...well, none of them were ever very stable, except Andromeda and Narcissa. Sirius was struggling between his impulse to stay loyal to his friends and his impulse to go and rescue his brother. He knew that the moment he went to Regulus’s rescue, V—Voldemort would take him, and then Sirius would be tortured until he gave up your parents’ location.”

“Because of the prophecy,” Harry guessed.

Peter glanced at him sharply, then relaxed. “I had thought you didn’t know much about that,” he murmured. “Yes. Because of that. And Dumbledore wanted to spare Sirius that.”

“I don’t understand why,” said Harry. “The first time we met, you said that you had betrayed my parents on Dumbledore’s orders. If he was going to betray us anyway, why did it matter if you or Sirius did it?”

Peter’s mouth curved into a cruel grin, but Harry knew from the tone in his voice that the cruelty was all directed against himself. “Dumbledore didn’t want Sirius to have to make that choice, to decide between his friends and his brother. He explained everything to me and asked me to take Sirius’s place as Secret-Keeper. He performed a spell that—”

Harry cried out as the phoenix web flared across his vision. Peter reached out and caught his shoulder, holding him steady until the spasm passed.

"Never mind about the spell, then," said Peter softly. "Some other time. He asked me to take Sirius's place as Secret-Keeper, and told your parents the reason for the switch. They were horrified, of course." The emotion in Peter's voice now wasn't like anything that Harry had ever heard. "No one should ever have to make a decision like that, they told me. Poor dear Sirius should never be subjected to such a loss of innocence as choosing between his friends and his brother."

Harry heard the echo of other words behind the ones Peter spoke. After a moment, he drew them out.

Connor should remain innocent until the time he can face Voldemort...

With a gasp, Harry flushed the words from his mind. No. They aren't the same, not really. They did offer me a choice.

But he'd seen that choice in Dumbledore's Pensieve. A shudder of remembered anger racked Harry again, and he suffered a brief moment of despair. How did ordinary people cope with these emotions? How was he going to be normal when he hadn't dealt with them for the first twelve years of his life?

"I was already a spy among the Death Eaters," said Peter. "The Dark Lord would accept my betrayal of my friends for the same reason he accepted me as a credible Death Eater, Dumbledore assured me. He thought I was jealous of my friends for being more powerful and talented than I was. Aren't wizards of lesser power always afraid of those with greater, and jealous of them?"

"He was right. Once your parents made me the Secret-Keeper, the Dark Lord ceased torturing Regulus and killed him. He concentrated all his efforts on me. I held out for a week, then cracked when Dumbledore said to, and betrayed the house at Godric's Hollow. I told your parents that V—Voldemort had kidnapped the two of you and

taken you to one of the last battlefields, to sacrifice you there in a dark blood rite. Off they rushed. Voldemort came into the house that night, and I was right behind him when he struck.” Peter closed his eyes tightly.

Harry’s heart had sped up. The sound of it filled his whole world. He fought wildly to calm it down, because it was just as wildly important that he be able to hear Peter’s answer to his next question.

“They knew we would be betrayed? They risked our lives on purpose?”

Peter turned his head and fixed Harry with a careful eye. “Of course. You said you knew the prophecy. They knew what would happen when I led Voldemort into the house of a child born at the precise moment the prophecy said he should be born. And of course there are other clues in the prophecy that let them suspect your house was the right one.” Peter closed his eyes again.

“After that, it was rather simple,” he said, his voice gone strained and thin. “I ran, of course, when the Dark Lord fell. Your parents came back and found you wounded but alive, and the Dark Lord a pile of ash on the floor. They knew who must have betrayed them. The Aurors arrested me, and questioned me under Veritaserum, but the phoenix web was in my mind by then, already sinking deep. It filled me with a different kind of soul that gave me the appearance of truth. I was able to stare at them, and laugh, and proclaim my hatred and jealousy of James and Lily Potter. That was the same web that was going to give me the appearance of insanity in Azkaban, just in case anyone ever questioned me about that night. Dumbledore could say truthfully that he visited me several times, and I only appeared to grow more mad over the years. But Sirius was with me during the trial anyway, just to make sure that I didn’t place one foot wrong. He was determined that no one should ever discover that I’d been a sacrifice for him, because he didn’t want to be thought a coward or too weak to choose between his friends and his brother.”

Unbidden—like all his thoughts lately—Harry recalled what James had said to him when he’d told the story of cracking and using Crucio on Bellatrix Lestrange. And Peter’s betrayal hit Sirius hardest of all.

He was in the Ministry when they interrogated Peter. I don't think he slept for three more days after that. He had to hear every last detail, every last confession.

Sirius hadn't been trying desperately to learn why one of his beloved friends would commit a crime. He had been trying desperately to make sure that said beloved friend, a shield, a sacrifice, didn't reveal that he was either shield or sacrifice.

Harry swallowed several more times. Now was not the moment to get sick.

"And so you went to Azkaban for twelve years," he said.

"Almost twelve years," said Peter, his eyes distant. "Yes. That is what I did. If I had revealed what I had done under Veritaserum, I might have stayed out of Azkaban, but I would have revealed that Dumbledore had knowingly placed two small children in danger, and that was not permissible. Nor was it permissible to reveal that Sirius had suffered for so long."

"Not only Dumbledore," Harry whispered. "Our parents. Why? Why is that, Peter? Why would they do that?"

"The prophecy," said Peter.

Harry was starting to hate that word. He picked up a blade of grass and rubbed it between his fingers until the urge to tear the explanation out of Peter was gone. "But surely there must have been a greater justification than that," he said.

Peter blinked. "Of course there was. There was concealing Sirius's weakness, and bringing Voldemort down." He hugged his arms around himself and stared into the Forest. "You cannot understand what the First War was like, Harry. Everyone was tired, and certain they were going to lose, after eleven years of fighting. We'd grown up in Hogwarts in the knowledge that we'd be soldiers going to war. Everyone wanted an end. That was the cause of the hysterical celebration after Voldemort fell. No one really thought to question that, to ask how and why a baby could have defeated him without

something like the prophecy, which was never made public. They didn't want to. They had their hero, they had their villain, and that was it. That was all."

"They put Connor in danger," said Harry again. He could not get past that. He had always trusted his parents to know what was best, to save and protect his brother—if not as well as he could—and they had put Connor in danger when he was only a year old.

"And you, Harry," said Peter, looking strangely at him.

Harry swallowed. "Yes," he said, and then dodged the uncomfortable truth staring him in the face. "But why aren't you still in Azkaban? You stayed there twelve years. Why not the lifetime you were meant to stay?" His voice wavered into hesitancy on the last words.

"You are right," said Peter. "Dumbledore meant me to stay a lifetime. But I was left alone in Azkaban, without the constant reinforcement that I think you've had, if they've really tied your web—"

Harry shouted as his sight darkened with pain. Peter held his arm this time until it subsided, and then spoke carefully, watching Harry for the least sign of agony.

"Without reinforcement. And my web was tied to two things. One of them was my sense of friendship. That withered when none of my friends came to see me, when I realized they'd all been pitifully eager to sacrifice me just so that Sirius could sleep with an untroubled conscience."

"What about Remus?" Harry asked.

Peter looked hard at him. "Remus knew about it, too, Harry. He was too afraid of losing his friends ever to go against them." He laughed, harshly. "Remus is very good at ignoring things that he doesn't want to see."

The revelation hit Harry with the force of a hammer blow. He'd thought Remus was just another one of Dumbledore's victims. Instead, he, too, had conspired to hurt and maybe even kill Connor.

And you.

Harry gave the thought a vicious kick and focused back on Peter.

"And what was the second thing?" he asked, his own voice unexpectedly hoarse.

"A sense of duty," said Peter simply. "Dumbledore impressed it on me that this was my duty to the future, my duty as a Gryffindor, my duty to a world without the Dark Lord. And—well, he was right, I thought. So I gave up my personality and my freedom and the good will of the wizarding community for it."

"But the more I thought about it, the more resentful I became. As I said, the loss of my friends did that. I became convinced that it wasn't fair that I was sitting in that cell when Sirius was free to walk around, and the phoenix web might have controlled that." A feral smile spread over Peter's face. "But then I found another duty instead."

"What?" Harry whispered.

Peter locked eyes with him. "Protecting you. I promise you that I am not going to let the same thing happen to you that happened to me, Harry. I promised myself that, too, and I even got through the wards on the school that permitted the passage of Animagi until Dumbledore adjusted them to bar me specifically. I'm confined to the outside of Hogwarts now, but that doesn't mean I won't protect you. I was a sacrifice, and I lost so much because of it. I've been a sacrifice exactly as long as you have. Both of our trials began the same night. I broke free of my prison. I'm going to help you break free of yours by shattering that damn web. If you find another duty to substitute for the one the web originally attached to, then you're free. The web can't cope with that great a shift in priorities. The moment that I chose you over Sirius and James and Remus, then I was free."

"But that would mean I have to do something other than protect Connor," said Harry.

"Yes." Peter was immovable.

Harry shook his head at him, frantic. “I can’t. Then he’ll be left undefended when he goes forth to face Voldemort.”

“Sirius is training him, I thought,” said Peter. “He’ll have that training. And he’ll have the protection of other people, the adults and his friends and anyone else who fights the Second War. And I assure you that this is everyone’s war, Harry. Not even most of the Death Eaters stood by Voldemort when they thought he’d fallen. I’ve been prying and sniffing around my old haunts. They like their lives now, free and prosperous. They’re not eager to go back into slavery to a madman. They might be called by Voldemort’s magic, but they’ll seize any other option that seems at all viable.”

“Dumbledore—“

“He’s not viable,” Peter said sharply. “Not for them. Do you think someone who did what he did to me would hesitate to sacrifice Dark wizards whom he already despises?”

“Connor—“

“Maybe,” said Peter. “But he’ll have to grow in strength and training first. And that could be your duty, you know, Harry.”

“Training him?” Harry sat up straight. It was only a minor variation of the duties he had now, he thought. “I could do that.”

“Protecting the wizarding world,” said Peter. “Uniting it. Leading it. Providing an option for the Death Eaters and the purebloods and the others who would ordinarily rally to Voldemort’s side. You know their rituals. You have the magic that could shelter and protect them. Think about it, Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes and began to shake. The mere thought of taking his brother’s role as the Boy-Who-Lived was enough to activate the phoenix web. He felt burning pain begin to concentrate behind his eyes.

"I've said too much," Peter whispered. "I'm sorry. But think about it, please, Harry. And now I must go. I can feel the Dementors coming." His voice was threaded with old fear. "Be safe."

Harry heard the inrush of air as Peter transformed, and then the soft rustle of grass as he scurried away. A moment later, the phoenix web let him go enough that he could feel the cold approach of the Dementors on his back. They curved into the Forbidden Forest after Peter. Harry shivered.

His mind was in chaos, screaming and shouting at him.

They knew. They left us in danger.

Remus knew.

You don't have to live for Connor.

Dumbledore sacrificed Peter to spare Sirius.

He stood up, heavily, and made his way towards the school. He needed, badly, to speak with Dumbledore.

Harry had just slipped past the doors into the entrance hall when a piece of darkness unfolded from the wall and swept towards him. Harry winced. It was Snape, and unlike the conversation they'd had the day Harry first confronted Dumbledore, Harry wasn't in the mood to talk with him.

Snape, of course, gave him no choice. "What was that explosion of magic earlier, Mr. Potter?" he asked. His face was mostly in shadow, but Harry could see his eyes glittering with some intense emotion.

Harry sighed. "Dumbledore tried to trick me. There was a set of Pensieves he'd charmed to reinforce the phoenix web in my mind." He heard Snape's sucked-in breath, but forced himself to keep his eyes on the floor. He knew that Snape would probably have something to say about this, but he didn't think that he had the ability to deal with it right now, what with his thoughts stirred into chaos. "Draco helped me get rid of them, but then Dumbledore tried to hurt

Draco. So I called my magic to fight his, and sucked some of his power away.”

“And you did not come to me?” Snape’s voice sounded nearly dead. Harry winced again. That didn’t mean hurt. That meant anger so intense that not even his normal cold whisper was sufficient to express it. “You did not think that perhaps your guardian should know that the Headmaster is threatening his ward?”

Harry raised his head and stared at Snape. Well, I didn’t expect that. “But we already knew that,” he pointed out. “Dumbledore was threatening me before this. Why would you want me to come and report it to you again?”

Snape moved a step forward. Harry took a step back, watching him warily. He was not afraid, not exactly. He trusted Snape not to hurt him. But it was hard not to feel—well, cautious, especially with the way that he could feel Snape’s magic boiling under his shields. Snape was not as strong as Harry or Dumbledore, but his power had a sharp, cruel edge to it that made it a finely balanced blade on the occasions when he chose to wield it outside the confines of wand and spell.

“Guardian does not mean only guardian in a legal sense,” Snape said. His voice was strangled. Harry wondered if he was choking on rage or something else. “It means guardian in a protective sense as well. I could have helped you fend off Dumbledore, Harry. I could have spoken to him in place of the parents who will never stand up to him again.” Harry clenched his fists again; he feared that after what Peter had said, that was no more than the truth. “And I could have provided you with the protection and shelter that you need so badly,” and Snape’s voice twisted, with kindness more cruel than cruelty, “and which you will never convince yourself to seek.”

Harry held his breath, then forced it out his nose and mouth in regular, calm patterns. He couldn’t afford to get upset over this. He had a Headmaster to speak to about his sacrifice of Peter and his endangering of Connor. He couldn’t yell at Snape and shatter his mask.

"I'll remember that the next time, sir," he said. "May I please pass now? I'm going to speak to the Headmaster on another matter."

Snape looked startled for perhaps a tenth of a second. Even as Harry tried to slip around him, however, his hand darted out and seized his shoulder. Harry kept his stance relaxed and his gaze on the ground, so that Snape couldn't try wandless Legilimency on him.

"I do not want you alone with him," said Snape. "I'll go with you."

"No!" Harry tried to back away without looking up or really dislodging Snape's hand. He didn't want Snape to think he was really rejecting his guardianship. It was complicated. It started being complicated the moment you started having allegiances other than to Connor, whispered a part of his mind that might or might not be the phoenix web. "Please. I have to handle this on my own. Can I handle this on my own?"

"Why?" Snape was merciless, even as he knelt in front of Harry and spoke gently. "Why do you want to?"

"I—I don't want you hurt," said Harry, twisting his head away again. He couldn't tell Snape what Peter had said. Snape would only see it as more evidence that Sirius was dangerous or weak, and would seek to keep Harry away from him. Perhaps talking about that in the abstract would work. "And I'm going to say things to the Headmaster that concern Sirius. I don't know if you can control yourself around him if you know what those things are."

There was a tense, breathing silence. Then Snape said, "I have always told myself I was more concerned about the future than the past. That was what I told myself when I spied among the Death Eaters for Dumbledore. And it was perhaps the only time in my life when that has been true." He reached out and gripped Harry's chin, tilting it so that Harry's eyes met his. He did not try Legilimency, though. "These other years, I have brooded more on schoolboy grudges than the possibility of saving someone or healing someone or the future. That is true. And now it need not be. This is my chance to prove that, as much to myself as to you, Harry. I will come with you,

and whatever I learn about Black, I will hold silent, because you matter more to me than he does."

Harry closed his eyes to cover the emotions he was feeling, and nodded once. "Thank you, sir."

"Come." Snape swept to his feet like a great bird hovering over Harry. His hand never moved from its grip on Harry's shoulder, warm and intensely comforting. "Let us go see the Headmaster."

Albus told himself that he had expected the visit. Of course, that did not mean it did his old heart any good to see Harry walk in, laden with power and with eyes in which he could see the broken remnants of the phoenix web, and with Severus following closely behind him, his eyes wild. Albus winced. Severus has given himself entirely over to protection of this child. What happened to his knowledge of the greater cause? What happened to the man who was prepared to torture, to kill, to act the Death Eater for the sake of the wizarding world?

Harry Potter had happened, Albus answered himself, and sighed. Matters would have been a great deal simpler if Lily Potter had only ever borne one child, and if that child was Connor Potter.

"Professor Dumbledore," said Harry, his eyes pierced with half a dozen emotions. "I met Peter Pettigrew this evening. He told me why you sacrificed him."

Albus clamped down on his emotions. He would not show terror in front of either of them. Harry might miss it at this moment, but Severus's piercing eyes were fixed on his face and hadn't moved.

"He said that he went to Azkaban so that Sirius could live free," Harry whispered. "Why him, Professor?"

Albus felt his heart begin to beat again, slowly. So Harry knew part of the truth. He did not know the whole of it, the most vital part of it. Perhaps he never would. It all depended on how well Albus answered him. "I felt sorry for Sirius," he answered freely. "He had come from a Dark family, and been abused as a child. The moment he went into Gryffindor, his family began to turn their backs on him. Not even his

relationship with his brother could save him in their eyes, not once his brother went to Slytherin. But Sirius still remembered his brother fondly. That childhood experience of friendship with him was the seed that had formed the noble man we knew, that made it possible for Sirius to escape the shadow of Slytherin in the first place.” He heard Severus snort, but he made no move to meet the other man’s eyes, keeping his earnest gaze on Harry. “When that same brother was in danger, how could I ask Sirius to choose between betraying him and betraying his friends? True, he would have died when he went to Voldemort, but more than that, his soul would have been destroyed. I wanted to spare him that.”

“Why didn’t you want to spare Peter?” Harry’s voice was flat and unforgiving.

Albus spread his hands. Yes, I knew I could count on Peter’s selfishness. He must have escaped and shattered his web because he was so concerned that someone else know the truth. He could not stand to be a true sacrifice. Now that he has convinced Harry he was some abused innocent, he should leave him alone, because his vanity is satisfied. “Peter had already had a different life than Sirius,” he said simply. “One full of life and love and laughter as a child, and a friendship with the Marauders. The first sacrifice I ever asked him to make was as a spy among the Death Eaters, before Severus came to our side—“

“What?”

But Severus clamped his mouth shut in the next instant, even though his eyes glittered angrily. Albus watched him with an intense sadness etching his heart. I have already lost you, Severus. I know it. But I may not have lost Harry. Not yet.

“And then to become your parents’ Secret-Keeper in Sirius’s place,” Albus finished. “That spared Regulus, whom Voldemort killed at once when he had no more use for him, and it spared Sirius from making a decision that would have torn his soul apart.”

“But it didn’t spare Peter,” Harry whispered.

"Peter chose this," said Albus. "I told you once, Harry, that the phoenix web only works when someone accepts it willingly. That is what Peter did. He agreed to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban with the rest of the world thinking him a traitor. I honored him for his sacrifice. I do not honor him for what he has done since he escaped."

"You ordered him to betray us," said Harry. "You ordered him to put Connor's life in danger." There was a long silence, and then he breathed out, "Why?"

Albus could have fallen to his knees and prayed in thanks, did he think anyone or anything would have accepted this prayer. Despite the shattering of the phoenix web, despite Peter's words, he had not lost Harry, not yet. Harry believed that Connor's life was still more important than his own.

And, because of that, the wizarding world may be spared the intense revolution that Harry would otherwise bring upon it, the tearing and the ripping and the bloodshed.

Albus replied with all his heart. Harry could have this part of the truth, and welcome to it. "Because of the prophecy," he said. "It spoke of someone born to defy the Dark Lord at the end of July—a younger twin. You were the only pair who qualified. If the Dark Lord did not attack you, then the prophecy would never have come true. The dying would have continued. The First War would have ended with Voldemort's victory."

Harry wavered for a long moment. Then he said, "But you put a child in danger. There are those who would argue that if you had to sacrifice children, then you didn't deserve to win the War."

"Those people were not the ones who fought Voldemort," said Albus, his mind full of Plague-devastated battlefields, of the thunderstorm that Voldemort had turned to acid and set upon Hogsmeade, of the Children's Massacre with its crucifixions and the Eagleton house with its Muggleborn family made to rape and murder each other. "They are the ones who still have the luxury of ethics even in wartime."

"But what if you put him in danger again?" Harry whispered. "What if you put him in danger now?"

"That is why he is getting training from Sirius," said Albus, and then leaned forward. He had to impress this on the boy, now that Harry was turning aside from the role the prophecy had destined him for. "And why you must support him, Harry, not rip him in two. I understand that I have hurt you. I understand that your parents have hurt you. But what do you gain by drawing away from us, by choosing Severus as a guardian or listening to Peter? You will tear your twin apart, put him in danger of his concentration wavering even as he learns to fight Voldemort."

Harry swallowed.

"Harry," said Severus sharply, "that is not true. He also put your life in danger that night." He raised his head, and Albus flinched at the hatred in his eyes. I must watch him. I forgot how dangerous he was when angered. "He has asked unacceptable sacrifices of you. Is Connor's peace of mind worth so much more than your freedom?"

Harry only shook his head and said, "Truce, from now on. I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me." Then he turned away from the room, barely waiting for Albus's nod. Severus stayed a moment, his eyes locked on Albus's. Albus knew better than to try Legilimency. He remained silent.

"You are a bloody fool, Albus," said Severus. "You know what he could become." He shook his head twice, and then hurried after Harry. Albus could hear him speaking to the boy, trying to soothe him, trying to turn him from his loyalty to his brother.

Albus did not think it would work, not now. They had avoided disaster by the skin of their teeth, but they had avoided it. He had a truce with the boy, and he had seen for himself that Harry still cared more about Connor than about simply turning his magic loose to do what it would. He still had some hope for the future.

Perhaps it would have been better to leave him free, in danger of becoming a Dark Lord, than to bind him. He has a hatred of bindings

now. He will not understand that the wizarding world is built on them, that I cannot let him loosen them.

But he could be far more devastating than he is now. If he were free of all the bindings, if he knew all the truth, then he would wield a power that is stronger than he now has. Imagine the world then.

Albus could imagine the world then. He would not be able to prevent the bindings from being loosened if Harry knew everything, and then there would be civil war and bloody revolution and the death of everything he had worked so hard to build and protect and love.

And Sirius...

What the boy did not know about his godfather would not hurt him.

The situation now was not ideal, Albus knew, but he could maintain it. He could stay in a truce with the boy, defending what he still had rather than mourning what was lost. He was sure Harry would do the same, rather than risk losing his brother. He did not think himself that important. He would not challenge or confront his parents unless someone pushed him. And Severus cared too much for the boy to push him.

It had been, Albus decided as he stood and made for bed, a good day after all, and the only thing that would have made it better was the presence of Fawkes on his perch. Phoenixes, however, never seemed to know when they were wanted.

Chapter Sixteen: Comes a Dementor

Harry felt the thoughts ganging up on him again, that night when he lay in his bed in Slytherin and had no distractions but the soft breathing of the other four boys around him—which was too familiar to be a true distraction.

Harry closed his eyes, but sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. He felt Starborn's letter, which he'd hidden under the sheets, burning like a hot coal. He felt the questions that Peter had made him ask stirring in his head and looking at him with sharp eyes.

They've risked so much, in reaching out to me. Well, at least Peter has. I have no idea how much danger Starborn's in. But Peter is here, and keeps being here in spite of everything. Harry let out a long, slow breath. He lost his friends, his freedom, control of his own mind for twelve years. And he still would have been safer if he remained in Azkaban. At least then things wouldn't have changed. He could have had the comforts of routine, and Dumbledore's good will.

Instead, he left, and came for me, first to Godric's Hollow and then to Hogwarts. He didn't even know if I would listen to him. But he came anyway. He risked his newfound freedom.

And all he wants me to do is try to think without the phoenix web, to think about things a little differently than I've done so far.

Harry wrestled with the thought a while longer, but the conclusion he came to was always the same.

He risked too much for me. He made another sacrifice. The least I can do is try to honor that sacrifice, and ask his questions.

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the canopy of his bed. He missed Sylarana now as he had not in days. She could have helped him straighten out his thoughts and decide which one he should tackle first.

Well, when in doubt, work backwards. Sylarana had said that to him once, though she had been referring to the way that one ate a

Chocolate Frog. She did not seem concerned about the wisdom that said snakes always swallowed prey headfirst, and preferred to start with the legs.

Harry started with the Headmaster, therefore. When he settled the truce with Dumbledore, he had regretted, for a moment, the gift he'd sent to Lucius Malfoy, a mirror tuned to the silvery instruments in Dumbledore's office, and enabling Lucius to see what happened there. Harry had explained in his note that he felt compelled to answer the gift of great trust Lucius had given him—allowing him to spy on possible enemies—with a gift as great, to allow Lucius to spy on his greatest possible enemy. Such a mirror would be worth more than one linked to Godric's Hollow, the home of a pair of frightened wizards on the edge of a Muggle village.

Now, he did not regret it, because he was thinking about things the way that Peter would have wanted him to. He was thinking that the truce with Dumbledore could not hold. How could it? Dumbledore didn't just want Harry not actively opposing him. He wanted Snape away from Harry, and Harry was not about to let that happen. He wanted Harry's magic bound, and Harry was not about to let that happen, either.

He paused, startled at himself.

You aren't?

If someone else had asked him, he would have said that of course he would allow his magic to be bound, if Connor wished it. Connor had made the point that Harry's magic could hurt and frighten other people. Harry didn't want that to happen. Surely it would be better to cage his power.

But how would that work? It was only a temporary solution. And given what had happened the last time his magic had been fully under the control of the phoenix web, that "temporary solution" was as likely to get people killed as having the magic free. Harry wondered whether other wizards would rather be dead, or alive and afraid.

No, his magic would have to stay free.

Harry shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. His head throbbed in an odd, pleasant way that had nothing to do with the pain he got in his scar along with his dreams. He had the feeling that he should have seen this revelation long since, but better late than never.

So. Fight your way back. Now Snape.

Snape's refusal to indulge his hatred towards Sirius was another sacrifice, another change. How could Harry refuse to honor it? He had demanded peace from Snape on the matter of his godfather, and got it. Snape was trying. The least Harry could do was trust Snape in the matter of his legal guardianship, and that meant thinking about things the way Peter had asked him to, so that he could tell Snape when something went wrong or was bothering him.

This is simpler than I thought it would be, Harry realized in confusion, and moved his thoughts to Peter.

The phoenix web flared when he tried to consider betraying Connor, so Harry concentrated on the story about Regulus, and the fact that their parents, Dumbledore, Sirius, and Remus had left them alone to face Voldemort's attack. Harry wondered what would have happened if things had gone wrong, if the prophecy hadn't meant his brother to be victor over Voldemort. Would Dumbledore have shrugged at Lily and James and said that he was sorry? Would he have Obliviated them the way he did Remus?

Anger hissed through Harry, honest anger. It was still hard to feel angry on his own behalf, but he could and would feel enraged over Connor. The phoenix web even liked that, and retreated from paining him.

There have been too many sacrifices, Harry thought, as he remembered Peter's distant eyes when he spoke of the First War. That was the way they fought then. We can fight the Second War a different way. I don't need anything to be different, because I was raised and trained to be a soldier, but someone like Peter shouldn't be asked to do the same in the middle of his life. I want to fight in

some way that won't involve anyone but me having to sacrifice anything.

He waited for pain from the phoenix web, or pain from his own conscience. And there was nothing. There was only darkness in his mind, bright darkness lit with the shine of possibilities like stars. Harry shivered, and now there was gooseflesh running up and down his arms, and his breath was coming short, and he remembered the sentences in Starborn's letter that had most caught his attention.

Imagine that he was conscious, every moment, of what his power could do and what it might be used for, and weighed the hopes of those who came to him, and rejected the ones he deemed wrong instead of mindlessly obeying every wizard's wish. Imagine such power bent to defend, to protect and serve.

And Harry thought, for the first time, I really could do that. I really could be that. But to do that, I have to be conscious of my power, not caging it, not ignoring it, not hoping that everyone else will ignore it.

The possibility, tasting of morning, lasted for all of a moment. Then the ordinary, regular thoughts crowded in again.

Doing that would frighten other people. There's no doubt of it. And do I want to call attention to myself just now, when I've just got Snape as a guardian, and have Aurors investigating my parents? And Peter could still be lying. And Starborn could be lying. It's even likelier with Starborn. He admitted to being a pureblood who uses the word Mudblood. I can't trust them. This is all just an aberration. There's a reasonable explanation for all of it. Come summer, I'll be back with my parents and Connor, and all of this will seem like a nightmare.

This time, it was the ordinary, regular thoughts that felt false and strained, and it was his own voice and not the voice of his magic or rage that answered his last statement, quiet and confident. It will only seem like that if you let it.

Harry lay awake, trembling, for some time after that.
"Nervous, Harry?"

Harry snorted at Millicent and bit into his sausage. "Hardly," he said around the food, ignoring Pansy's grimace of disgust at the way bits of sausage flew out of his mouth. "It's just a Quidditch game."

"It's against your brother," said Millicent, leaning forward, her eyes shining with the Slytherin instinct for scenting a weak point, or blood in the water. "I'd think that would throw you. After all, you've gone to great lengths before not to win that game, and you seemed quite distressed last year when you did win."

"That was last year," said Harry, and bit into another sausage without quite finishing the first one. Pansy pointedly edged away from him.

Millicent lifted her head. "You've changed your mind, then?" she whispered.

"Did I say that?" Harry turned back to his breakfast, ignoring her growl of frustration. Let her see how it felt, to be tormented and teased and played with.

Draco, of course, leaned over and whispered, "Do you really mean to win this game, Harry, or not?" Draco always considered that he had a right to know truths like that, and he probably had more of a right than most people, Harry conceded. As it happened, though, he knew why Draco was asking this now. He'd been listening the night before when Draco bet Blaise ten Galleons that Harry would win. Blaise was betting that Harry would deliberately throw the game again. It irritated Harry slightly that neither of them was betting on Connor to win, but he was fairly sure he would get blank looks if he asked them why, so he didn't bother.

"I don't know," he answered Draco honestly, and went back to his sausages.

"You should," Draco whispered, stealing one of the sausages. Harry didn't know why, since his own plate had been loaded with them, but he couldn't do much more than growl a protest; he'd bitten into too much food for even him to talk through without spilling crumbs to the table. It's too bad that the game today isn't a contest in that skill, he

thought. I could best Connor at that and not feel awkward about doing it. He'd probably be disgusted. He snorted at the mental picture of what his brother's expression would be as Harry crammed food into his mouth, and so almost missed Draco's next words. "Real talent deserves some recognition."

"You're not being subtle, you know, Draco," Harry pointed out as he finally got his mouth free. "I might have wondered what you meant first year, but now I know."

Draco frowned at him. "Don't you want to win?"

"Yes," said Harry, and ate one more bite before Flint's bellow rang out across the Great Hall, summoning the members of the Slytherin Quidditch team for one final lecture and yelling session. He sighed and stood. "And no."

"You're bloody confusing," Draco whined at him.

"I'm being honest with you," said Harry, as he eased around the table and towards the entrance to the Great Hall. "The inside of my mind is bloody confusing."

He had just started to hurry, not daring to look towards the Gryffindor table, when the shadow of wings swept across his head. He paused and looked up, blinking. An owl circled around him, then dropped a letter into his hand and hurtled back towards the window out of the Great Hall, as if it were too busy to wait for a reply or even a Knut or treat.

Harry turned the letter over. He had suspected from the creamy paper what it was, and the Ministry seal confirmed it. He swallowed once and eased a finger beneath the seal, breaking it open.

"Hurry it up, Potter!" Flint shouted.

"Just a minute, Flint!" Harry yelled back, and then drew out and unfolded the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter:

It has come to our attention that your appointment of Severus Snape as your guardian is irregular in at least one respect. There is evidence that Professor Snape was once a Death Eater, and though he was spared Azkaban by the good word of Headmaster Dumbledore and indeed was not reported reliably at the scene of any Death Eater activity, his reputation is hardly pristine. He would hardly seem the first choice of guardian for the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, who might himself be a target of Death Eaters seeking to use him against Connor Potter.

We must therefore be sure that you are not under any outside coercion. Enclosed with this letter is a charmed parchment that will check you for the Imperius and other forms of compulsive magic. When it is touched and has completed its listing of any relevant spells you may be under, it will return to us. We also plan at least one visit from the following Aurors, so that they may interview you personally:
Auror: Kingsley Shacklebolt

Auror-in-training: Aidan Feverfew

If our Aurors see any irregularity, they will not hesitate to recommend removing Professor Snape as your guardian. In that case, we are minded to appoint either Professor Dumbledore, as was our original intention, or your godfather, Sirius Black, whom Auror Shacklebolt has done us the convenience of pointing out lives at Hogwarts. Please prepare for the visit on the second Saturday of this month.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry let out a little sigh. Well, he had known something like this would probably happen. He had not expected the visit from the Aurors specifically, and he wondered what it would take to fool them. A good deal, he suspected. Shacklebolt was Dumbledore's, part of the Order of the Phoenix, and if he trusted this Auror-in-training, he

would either also be part of the Order or a neutral who could do no harm—certainly not an enemy of Dumbledore's.

Harry never doubted that he would need to fool them. Going back, falling into Dumbledore's pocket, was simply not an option.

He swallowed. You are thinking the way Peter wanted you to think again, he accused himself.

And is that a bad thing?

Harry shook his head and straightened his spine. Flint was glaring at him from across the Hall now.

"Any day that you see fit to join us, Potter," he sniped.

Harry strode out of the Great Hall. He could feel thoughtful gazes fixed on his back, but he had no inclination to turn and meet them. He had a lecture to attend, a match to play, and a decision to make, probably in mid-air.

Harry kicked into the air. He could feel eyes on him. The rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team would be watching, because Flint had managed to convince the rest of them that Harry was the reason their practices went so well. Harry wished he wouldn't. Taking credit for his own Captaincy would be a good start, even if said Captaincy did consist mostly of yelling.

He could feel the Slytherins who'd bet on him to win or throw the game watching. They'd probably debate every move he made, Harry thought as he swerved around the first Bludger batted at him by one of the Weasley twins, because they would want to be absolutely sure if he'd flown in such a way as to hand the game over to Connor, or just had a piece of bad luck.

The Gryffindors were watching him, and especially Connor, whose eyes had gone wary. He no longer expected to win, automatically, when he played Harry. Harry told himself he was glad. His brother needed to experience real competition in order to grow. It was as simple as that. Harry should have seen it last year and done

something about it then, though he'd been a bit too busy fending off an enchanted Bludger to think about it.

He knew his parents, who had come for the game, wouldn't be watching him. He wondered idly if the Fugitivus Animus would blur his shape in their eyes, or just convince them that he was someone else.

"And Gryffindor secures the Quaffle!" Lee Jordan roared triumphantly.
"Chaser Angelina Johnson carries it—"

Abruptly he squeaked, and the Gryffindor stands roared in outrage. Harry briefly turned from his search for the Snitch to see Flint cutting Angelina off, turning his broom in such a way that she nearly fell from the sky. She had to clutch at her own broom, and the Quaffle bounced from her arms. Flint grabbed it and sped towards the hovering Gryffindor Keeper, Oliver Wood.

Harry shuddered at the look on Flint's face. He obviously wanted to win this game, badly enough to risk fouling an opposing player, and the expression on Wood's face wasn't much better. Mad for Quidditch, the both of them.

"And the Snitch has been sighted!" Jordan shouted, recovering from how massively unfair life was. "There goes Connor Potter, surely the most magnificent Seeker on the field, after it!"

Harry glanced once at his diving brother, then shook his head. That would be a feint; he'd played Quidditch with his brother too long not to recognize the way he bent over his broom, prepared to spin off in one direction or another. The Slytherin Beaters were falling for it, chasing him, but Harry preferred to rise and hover above the chaos, still looking for that flash of gold.

"Fall off your broom."

Harry clutched at his broom handle in shock. He darted a quick glance around, but he could not see who might have spoken. It certainly wasn't another Quidditch player; they were all below him. And the stands were full of staring eyes and screaming mouths. It

had sounded like none of them, actually. It had sounded like a voice half in his head, the way that Sylarana used to speak to him.

“Fall off your broom. Leave this match to your brother.”

Harry, now that he was watching for it, felt the slithering of a cold wind around his thoughts. This was the compulsion gift, he realized. Someone was trying to make him fall by compelling him to do it.

He thought of Connor and discarded him in the same instant. Connor would want to win the game fairly, and he was a bit busy at the moment, skimming along just above the grass to escape the Beaters and their Bludgers. But it was still compulsion.

That left Dumbledore, but Harry didn’t think Dumbledore wanted him harmed in the way that a fall from his broom would leave him harmed.

Sirius.

Harry caught his breath as a shock of betrayal tore through him. Of course, it would be that way, he thought a moment later. Sirius had made no secret of his allegiances this year, even as he helped all four Quidditch teams prepare for the matches. He wanted Gryffindor to win. He expected to see the Quidditch Cup adorning Gryffindor House at the end of the year. Harry had prevented that from happening the last two years, and Sirius might well have decided to remove him as a threat.

But does he really want me dead? Harry looked down at the boil of green and red robes beneath him. That’s what could happen if I fell from this height.

Now that he knew what was happening, he became filled with a reckless desire to test if Sirius really meant it. He aimed his broom at the sky and soared upward, ignoring Jordan’s amused commentary about how the Slytherin Seeker seemed to have decided to chase birds instead of Snitches. Harry was two hundred feet above the Pitch, then three hundred. He waited.

“Fall off your broom.”

Yes, he means it, Harry thought in a daze as he bounced the compulsion off his Occlumency shields. Oh, Sirius. Are House rivalries really that important to you, still? Or are you just not thinking?

He lowered his gaze, sweeping the stands until he saw Sirius's untidy black hair. Sirius was sitting beneath a colorfully decorated Gryffindor banner with their parents and Remus, of course. He would be concentrating intensely to summon the compulsion gift from that far below. Harry had no doubt he could do it, though. Connor had had to meet his eyes when he demonstrated it, but Connor's gift had been new then. Sirius had been well-trained in it for a long time.

"Fall off your broom."

"No," Harry snapped back aloud, irritated, and then looked down to see Sirius's head tilt back. Harry couldn't read his expression, being too high up, but he could make out the pale smear of his face, and that was enough to confirm that, yes, Sirius had been talking him into a fall, and Sirius could hear him back.

Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue, and looked around for the Snitch. He still didn't know for sure what he would do when he saw it, but his desire to catch it was a bit stronger than before. If Sirius wants to see Slytherin lose so very badly, I am disinclined to oblige him.

Then he saw it, a golden flutter dancing and looping ahead of him, as though it were taking a small stroll alone in this empty expanse of sky. Harry tensed, but didn't move, listening instead to Jordan's commentary for a moment.

"Slytherin scores," he said, sounding displeased, "40-20."

Harry nodded slightly to himself, and felt his mind open up in front of him again, the way it had Sunday night. He was making another decision that would change things, and he wasn't sure he would like all the consequences.

But it wasn't his fault that the Snitch was up here, and Connor was down there. Nor was it his fault that Gryffindor was trailing Slytherin right now, and Harry's snatch of the Snitch would let them win conclusively.

It was much easier not to think, Harry found as he pushed himself forward. He'd win the match, and then see what happened.

Of course, the moment he began flying after it, the Snitch began exhibiting evasive behavior, darting back down towards the players and cutting from side to side. Harry gave himself over to a Seeker's instincts, and none of the evasive maneuvers mattered. He was not behind the Snitch, but slightly in front of it, his hand poised to the right by the time it fluttered there, his body leaning forward when the Snitch stopped flying backwards.

"Fall off your broom."

Sirius's command simply rolled over him and vanished when he was in this mental state, and then Harry's hand closed around the Snitch. He'd planned to let out a howl of triumph, to mark the moment, but when he felt the frantic beat of the tiny wings against his palm, he could do nothing but swallow. He held up the Snitch in his closed hand and flew back closer to the players, hoping someone would notice soon.

Lee Jordan did. "Potter's caught the Snitch," he said, in a dazed voice. "Slytherin wins, 190-20."

Harry heard the cheer erupt from the throats below him, at least the throats clad in green or sitting in the Slytherin green-draped stands. He smiled as he saw the gleams of pale and dark hair that would be Draco and Blaise, the one taunting the other into paying up. Harry thought he might be in shock. His breath rushed through his lungs, and he was shuddering slightly, and the air around him was very clear and bright.

"Fall off your broom."

Harry shook his head and turned to glare down at Sirius. The match is over. Slytherin won. Why does he have to keep doing this?

He was just in time to see Sirius rise to his feet, his eyes apparently intent on where Harry hovered, and Peter hit him like a whirlwind. Harry felt his jaw gape, and did not care. Peter appeared to leap up from between the slats of the stands—maybe he'd come as close as he could in rat form, or actually transformed as he was making his way through the gaps in the boards—and bear Sirius down onto the stands as he tackled him. The compulsion ceased at once, but now people in the Gryffindor stands were screaming for a different reason.

Harry narrowed his eyes and hurtled towards them, letting his Nimbus 2001 fly as fast as it could. The rest of the Pitch flashed by in confused blurs of green and scarlet, and then he was above the fight. "Peter!" he yelled. "Sirius! Stop it!"

Sirius had already transformed, and Peter was trying to hold down, or fight back, or do something else with an enormous black dog. Harry knew at once that he was going to lose. Peter was still thin and shaky from Azkaban, and Sirius was enraged and snarling on top of being healthy.

And if Sirius wins and retakes Peter...

A cold wind blew in from the side. Harry reared back and saw the Dementors pouring onto the Pitch, aiming for Peter. Their black shapes appeared to ripple in the strengthening wind. Their eyeless faces—Harry had learned now that they were eyeless—were turned in one direction. People screamed and fainted all around them, and they didn't appear to notice.

Harry bared his teeth and sharpened his grip on the Snitch. His hand hurt from the tightness of his clutch. Good. The pain will give me something to focus on.

He flew straight at the Dementors.

They didn't stop coming, but they did ripple and part, and then Harry could see the gray one he'd met in King's Cross Station in the middle

of them, walking down the suddenly empty space like a king down an aisle in his throne room. That sensation of cold eyes from the eyeless face assaulted Harry again, and that voice like an icy spike hammered in through one ear. Harry pulled up, hovering. He didn't dare fly when he was in such pain.

What are you doing? This one has escaped from Azkaban prison. He is ours to retake.

"I don't want you to retake him," said Harry, and bore down with his right hand to make his fingers cramp and tremble, and his mind come back from the threatening glimpses of the Chamber that danced on the edges of his vision. "You—you called me something, the last time we met. What does that mean?"

Vates. The gray Dementor's voice had turned colder. But though we might listen to you, vates, that does not mean we obey.

Harry had no idea what the Dementor was talking about, but he knew what it meant: the Dementors were still spreading out around him and focusing on Peter. He didn't want that to happen.

"You touched my mind last time," he said. "Why, if you don't care?"

The vates is important to us, said the gray Dementor, and reached out a shadow of a hand on which ghostly fingers flickered. But our own responsibilities are to guard the prisoners of Azkaban. We have no choice about obeying that binding, any more than you have a choice about obeying your own.

Harry took a deep breath. What he thought he had to do now was far more than just listening, or thinking. But too many people had made too many sacrifices, or might have to make them. Peter, and Snape, and Draco, and Connor.

It ends here.

"If I could free you from that binding?" he whispered.

The Dementors all froze as one. Harry could feel them trembling, and wondered if that was what they did in place of breathing.

Then the gray Dementor said, in a voice that felt as though it were leaving ice crystals frozen on his face, Only the true vates could do that. And you are very far from being a true vates yet.

“Free my magic, then.” Harry lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at the gray Dementor. “You want to be free? You want to have possibilities other than guarding Azkaban?” He remembered the phrases in Starborn’s letter. “I think I have power that I might bend to protect and serve, and I would refuse compulsion if I could. I’ve had it used against me too often to like it. But I can’t get rid of this binding on my own.”

The phoenix web flared behind his eyes, but Harry thought hard about doing this for Connor, getting the Dementors off the field so that he wouldn’t be terrified, and the pain in his head calmed.

That is the first step, said the gray Dementor, and then it glided forward and reached out a hand towards him.

Harry calmed his fear and grasped its fingers with its left hand.

Cold sank into him and overwhelmed him, freezing his arm from the hand down, but Harry had felt the intense cold of his own magic and did not flinch. The swirl of ice bore up to his shoulder and then across to his neck and towards his head. Harry closed his eyes.

The warm flare of the phoenix web was there to greet him, and then the Dementor’s power reached his mind. This time, it did not simply rip and tear at his thoughts as it had in King’s Cross. Harry had invited it in, and that made the difference. Harry could feel the way the Dementor trod carefully through his thoughts, stirring up happy memories that it delicately fed on, to keep itself locked in his head while it completed its work.

And it did complete its work. Harry saw the phoenix web turn blue from gold, and then he felt it begin to crack and fray. Behind it rose a swell of power, and he panted, afraid of what it might mean.

We will not force you to free us, the gray Dementor whispered to him, the voice still painful. The vates cannot be forced, or he is the not the vates. And we can do nothing about the part of the web that is tied to your brotherly duty. But freeing your magic? Yes, we may do that. At the least, we shall enjoy it.

Harry didn't have time to question what that meant before the web dropped in shards of ice, and his magic broke completely free for the first time in his life.

The gray Dementor was borne backwards out of his mind on swelling waves of power. Harry sobbed, and then bowed his head as he felt magic spiral down his arms, warming the path of ice that breaking the phoenix web had made. Then it reached his fingertips and rose all around him, an incandescent wave of light that filled the Quidditch Pitch and struck wildly for the sky beyond.

Harry managed to slit his eyes so as to see through the radiance, and became aware that his magic was singing, in a voice far deeper and gladder than the voice of the phoenix web. The song echoed through his body, his mouth, his ears, and its cheerful booming shook the earth, reminding Harry of Hagrid's voice. That ceased after a moment, but the light continued rising from him, forming an enormous pair of white-gold wings that beat lazily from his shoulders and covered the shocked faces staring at him in brilliance.

Heated wind stroked his skin, and Harry saw the Forbidden Forest stirring, the trees bowing as if in answer to that wind. Creatures were moving at the edge of the trees, too. Harry heard the thin sound of many cries, many greetings. He lifted his head as the wings dropped from his shoulders, dissolving into sharp motes of light, and smiled in their direction.

He looked back down at the stands. Peter was gone, and, Harry had to hope, safe. The Dementors were nowhere in sight. Remus was on his feet, staring hard at him. The rest of the school was staring at him, too, but screaming in shock, and the expressions on their faces were different from the one on Remus's, which was unexpectedly yearning.

Harry didn't know what the vates was, not exactly, but he knew it had something to do with freedom and magical creatures, and he wondered if Remus had recognized him in the way a werewolf might.

He turned slowly on his broomstick, looking along the stands. Ron was furiously scratching his shoulders. Neville was staring with an open mouth and shining eyes. Percy Weasley had his hand over his face. Hermione was mouthing questions at him that Harry didn't think he could have answered even if he could hear her. McGonagall was on her feet, her hands clasped together as if to hold something precious between them, her face wildly proud.

Dumbledore was staring at him in horror.

Harry glanced at the Slytherin stands, and surprised a look of pleasure and wonder on Millicent's face. Pansy had her mouth open. Draco was standing up and applauding, while Blaise looked as though someone had smacked him in the face with a hammer. And Snape...

Snape's triumph hung around him like a roaring black fire to someone who knew him as well as Harry did, even though he'd done no more than rise to his feet and look up at Harry.

Harry read the next step in his guardian's face, and nodded. He was terrified, and he did not dare look at his brother, but he knew what had to happen next.

No hiding. No going back. We face what comes from this. We must.

He started to fly towards Snape, and then paused as another voice rang out over the field. This one was very familiar, but it didn't come from inside his head. Instead, singing, Fawkes soared over the field and came to settle on Harry's shoulder. Harry adjusted himself to carry the weight and raised a trembling hand to stroke the phoenix's feathers. He only realized he still held the Snitch when he realized that he couldn't unclench his fingers from around it.

Fawkes fit his head into the curve of Harry's neck, and gave a low, glad croon.

Harry took a deep breath, accepted the heat seeping into him like courage, and flew towards Snape.

Chapter Seventeen: Shut Up, Sirius

Harry was trembling by the time he landed beside Snape, despite Fawkes's warm presence on his shoulder, despite the fact that he knew there could be no going back, despite the comforting hand that Snape immediately clapped onto his other shoulder. Only his iron determination kept him from running.

Well, that and the sense of what he owed to so many people. The sacrifices had gone far enough.

It ends here.

Harry turned and lifted his chin, meeting Dumbledore's eyes. It was his move now. Harry was not about to clap his magic under bindings again. Nor would he run. He had every right to come over to his guardian and accept congratulations for winning the match for Slytherin. He had no reason to whimper and cower as if he had done something wrong, or hide.

He finally managed to unclench his fingers from the Snitch, and smiled faintly at Snape as he let the little golden ball go. Its wings were broken. "It looks like Madam Hooch will have to use a different set of balls for the practice matches," he said, and Snape's gaze grew, if possible, fiercer. It seemed as though he had forgotten the Quidditch triumph in the wake of what happened next.

"She will indeed," he said. "That was incredible flying, Harry. Both during the match, and what came...after."

Harry swallowed, and felt a tingle of weariness run through him. He didn't show it. They could not show any weariness, any weakness, not right now. The easiest course for the Ministry and anyone else who wanted to enslave him would be to pretend that a mere child couldn't handle that much magic, and herd him, clucking, into the "care" of someone who would make sure his power was bound again. But he had to be honest with Snape. He had promised he would be. "Better than you know," he said. "Sirius was trying to compel me to fall off my broom at the same time."

Snape did not move for a moment. Then his gaze rose past Harry, and Harry saw Sirius's death in his face. He apparently shouldn't have trusted Snape's newfound control around his godfather that much.

"He will not leave the Pitch alive," said Snape. If he had made it a loud, dramatic announcement, then Harry would not have worried. But he said the words casually, and drew the wand from his sleeve, and Harry knew he was seeing the man who had run as a Death Eater at Voldemort's side. Even more telling, the shields were rising off Snape's magic. If he wanted to, in this kind of rage, he could simply will Sirius's heart to stop beating. Harry was grateful beyond words that he had thought of his wand first.

He reached up and gripped Snape's arm, causing Fawkes to give a disapproving chirp as he shifted positions. "No," he said, when his guardian looked at him. "I don't want him harmed. I want him alive."

Snape did not look as though that would change his mind. Harry firmed his grip and leaned in close to say, "He is my godfather. He's still that."

"Not by the time I finish with him," said Snape.

Harry sighed. "I know that you probably think he doesn't deserve to be my godfather any more—"

"He does not," said Snape, his voice smooth, "deserve to live."

"Please let him speak to us," said Harry. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Dumbledore already coming towards them, his robes billowing around him. "Please let him explain why he would do such a thing. I have the power to demand explanations like that and get them, now. Dumbledore has to treat with me on a much more equal footing. Please?"

Snape took a deep breath. Then, abruptly, he smiled, and the shields came down over his magic again. "I suppose," he murmured, "that I would have little to gain from killing Black in public and in such a

manner that the Headmaster, at least, would immediately guess my hand in the death."

Harry squinted hard at Snape. He knew him well enough by now to guess that the important parts of that statement had to do with killing Sirius in public and in a traceable way. But what about private, untraceable ways?

He is a Potions Master, Harry thought uneasily, and felt his heart begin to pound hard.

"Sir—"

He got interrupted by Dumbledore's arrival, and by Draco's. Draco stepped up to stand at his side, every bit of him radiating wonder and happiness and protectiveness, and Dumbledore halted in front of Harry and inclined his head in a little bow. It was by far the most equal gesture he'd ever got from Dumbledore. Harry bowed back, reassured now, despite Dumbledore's narrow-eyed glance at Fawkes. The phoenix preened his tail feathers and ignored Dumbledore.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "surely you will want to come and speak with me about—your new magic, and other things, in the privacy of my office? Surely you would like some answers?" His eyes had a careful look to them, and Harry recognized it. Dumbledore was making as gracious a surrender of this as possible. He did not want Harry for one moment to think he was defeated. Harry could almost admire the old bastard. At least he knew his politics.

"I do," said Harry. "But I want Professor Snape to come with us, as my legal guardian, and Draco, as my best friend and as a witness from the pureblood community, and Professor McGonagall, as a witch of untouched reputation, and Hermione Granger, as a witness from the Muggleborn community, and Sirius Black, to answer for his crimes, and Remus Lupin, to be answered for the crimes done to him."

Dumbledore stared at him. He understood the reasoning behind Harry's gestures, of course, but he seemed stunned that Harry would actually go through with them. Harry raised his eyebrows mockingly,

his fear retreating as he started to enjoy himself again. Of course I am going to go through with them. I'll use any weapon against you I can, Dumbledore, and not only the supposed Slytherin ones. The more witnesses, and the more varied, the better.

Dumbledore nodded once, and then said, "It shall be as you suggest. You will give me a minute to speak with Professor McGonagall, Miss Granger, Professor Black, and Professor Lupin?"

Harry inclined his head again. "Of course, sir."

He felt Draco take his arm as Dumbledore moved away. "Is that wise?" he whispered. "After all, Professor McGonagall is such a busybody. And Black just tried to kill you. And Granger's twice the busybody that McGonagall is, and—"

"Yes?" Harry encouraged mildly, his gaze locked on Dumbledore's retreating back. Sirius was human again, but still snarling and looking around for Peter, whom Harry thought must have got away. He sagged when Dumbledore spoke to him, though. Professor McGonagall was already making her way calmly towards the Headmaster.

"She's a Mudblood."

Harry glanced at Draco. "I can't force you to stop using that word, Draco," he said. "I won't force you to stop using that word. I will ask you to please stop using it around me. I don't like it, and it's ridiculous, anyway. Going by terms of sheer magical power, you know that Hermione's one of the strongest witches in the school." Fawkes added a croon after his words, as though to confirm that.

"I know that!" Draco sounded peevish. "But Mudbloods just don't belong, Harry. And I thought you were going to ally with the purebloods."

"I'm allying with everybody," said Harry. "If I can ally with the Dementors, I can surely fit in some witches and wizards who grew up in the Muggle world."

"You must tell me what happened with the Dementors," said Draco.

"Must?" Harry asked, watching Remus's expression as he glanced over Dumbledore's head at Harry. The Headmaster was casting Sonorus now, making some speech, probably reinforced with an edge of compulsion, to calm the crowd down and make them sure that things were being handled. Harry knew some people would calm down and leave, but he doubted that the Headmaster would be able to make them stop thinking about this. The headlines would appear in the Daily Prophet tomorrow. The Ministry would be notified. The news was probably already sweeping like a storm throughout the community of people Starborn was trying to maneuver.

Harry had to accept that. He had made his decision. There was no going back.

I suspect I will need regular reminders of that, he thought, and tightened his shoulders, causing Fawkes to flutter in place. The Headmaster had summoned Hermione. She was giving Harry a curious look, her hand tightening on something around her neck. Harry tilted his head. He could feel an intense aura of magic radiating from the thing, whatever it was.

"Well, I'd like you to tell me what happened with the Dementors," said Draco.

Harry broke his gaze on his enemies, or tentative allies, and smiled at Draco. "I will."

The other Slytherins surrounded him then. They ranged from Blaise, who was pretending everything was normal and accusing Harry of winning the game purely to lose him ten Galleons, to Millicent, who smiled more than she talked. But they walled Harry round in green and made him feel at home.

He did not look across the field for his parents and his brother. There seemed to be no point, not right now. His path was still too new.
"Would anyone fancy a cup of tea?"

Harry listened as Hermione and Sirius accepted, while everyone else refused, Snape with no more than a dark expression. Dumbledore had conjured chairs for the seven other people now crammed into his office. Harry sat between Snape and Draco, with Hermione and McGonagall across from him and Sirius and Remus in chairs on the sides of the rough circle. Harry could still meet Dumbledore's eyes, since Hermione's and McGonagall's chairs flanked the Headmaster's desk. Fawkes was not with him. He had fluttered away towards the dungeons, singing, rather than enter the Headmaster's office. When a phoenix chose his allegiance, Harry reflected, he did it rather thoroughly, and did not turn back, either.

He could feel the weight of tense expectation in the room. Merlin, he was radiating some of it himself. This was the moment when some shells were going to have to crack. He wondered idly for a moment what question Dumbledore expected him to ask first. Something concerning his parents, concerning Connor, concerning the phoenix web?

In the end, he decided it wouldn't matter. Rather than reacting to what Dumbledore wanted him to do, he would lead the dance and force Dumbledore to react to him instead.

"Professor Dumbledore," he said. He would stick to titles until they were open enemies. They weren't, not yet. This was the steel fist in the velvet glove, the same role he had danced opposite Lucius during his Christmas in Malfoy Manor. "Will you please enlighten me as to why Sirius Black might have been trying to convince me to fall off my broom during the Quidditch match?"

Hermione choked on her tea. McGonagall paled. Sirius slumped back in his seat, bowed his head, and wouldn't look at anybody.

Remus stood up and shouted at Sirius.

"You were doing that? I thought Harry might be having some trouble with his flying, but I never—Sirius—you really did—" He broke off, but his eyes were glowing, and his voice had become a rumbling snarl on the last words. Harry had only seen him angry like that once before,

and then he'd been too deeply under the influence of the phoenix web to appreciate it.

"I did," Sirius said softly. "I can't—there is no apology that will be enough, Harry. But I'm sorry." He recited the whole thing in a dull voice, his hair still falling across his face.

"Tell me why, Padfoot," said Remus, stepping forward until he stood directly in front of Sirius's chair. "I'm owed that, at least, I think."

Sirius looked up, and Harry stared. He hadn't really paid attention to Sirius in the last few days, occupied as he was with the thoughts that Peter had asked him to think. Sirius barely looked human. His face was gray, his eyes bloodshot, and shadows that indicated lack of sleep and pain both were cut into his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Moony," he said, his voice steady now, but still dull. "I can't tell the whole thing over again. I'll leave that up to Albus." He nodded to the Headmaster, and then slumped back down in his seat.

Harry looked in the Headmaster's direction, and surprised a gentle expression on his face. "Sirius?" he whispered. "You really grant me permission to tell them everything?"

"Yes," said Sirius, his voice flat and gray.

"You have suffered so much, my dear boy," Dumbledore murmured, and sighed. His eyes were more open than Harry had ever seen them. They were showing the love that Harry suspected Peter had gone to Azkaban for.

Dumbledore faced the witnesses and began to speak. His voice did not quaver, and his words did not falter or fade; they sounded almost detached. But the way his eyes went constantly to Sirius made up for all that he did not show in his voice, Harry thought.

"Harry Potter has asked why his godfather would betray him. I have denied him answers before, but now that Sirius Black has granted me formal permission to narrate the reasons, I will.

“Sirius Black was born with the compulsion gift—“ Dumbledore waited patiently for the shock wave to finish traveling around the room, and continued in the perfect moment, which was the moment before Hermione could begin asking questions “—and had it trained ruthlessly by his parents. He had a younger brother, Regulus, whom some of you will remember.” He looked to Remus, to McGonagall, to Snape. Remus’s face had gone absolutely pale, Harry thought. He narrowed his eyes. He would ask Remus, later, why it was that he had agreed to go along with Dumbledore and the rest of them, and betray Peter and Connor.

“Regulus had no compulsion gift,” Dumbledore said softly, “and did everything his parents wanted of him. He did not suffer as Sirius did. Sirius had the power, if he had not been trained, to make his parents do whatever he wanted them to do, to believe whatever he wanted them to believe. They had much smaller compulsion gifts, and they were terrified, scared sick, as purebloods often are, at the thought of being made to believe that perhaps Muggleborns were equal to them. My apologies, Miss Granger,” he added. Hermione nodded stiffly. Harry looked hard at her, and realized she was the only Muggleborn in the room. She would probably be thinking hard, and twice as hard as any other Muggleborn student in the same situation would, because she was Hermione. Harry decided to speak with her later, if he could.

It kept him from thinking too deeply about what he had just heard, for a moment. Then the thoughts came rushing and pounced him. Sirius...they feared Sirius, just as my parents feared me.

“They tried as hard as they could to sway Sirius to their way of thinking, so that he would never wish to make them believe otherwise, because he would believe the same things,” Dumbledore’s soft voice continued. “They—well. I am afraid beatings would have been the least of it. But they were pureblood wizards, and, moreover, of a pureblood line to whom Dark magic came as naturally as breathing.” He looked at Sirius again, and there was desperate fondness in his eyes. “Do you feel up to showing them the scar, Sirius?” he whispered.

Sirius took a deep breath, put his teacup down beside his chair, and rolled up his left sleeve. Harry stared. The scar there was one he knew he had never seen before, and should have; Sirius had probably been using charms to mask it. It rolled from Sirius's shoulder to just past his elbow, and resembled a branching vein. Harry was not sure what could have made it. It certainly didn't look like the cuts from a blade that he had studied how to heal, nor the aftereffects of any Dark spell he knew.

"That is the remnant of an Amotio Maga spell," said McGonagall, and when Harry looked at her, she seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

"Yes," Dumbledore acknowledged softly. "When his parents were displeased with him, they took Sirius's magic and locked it into a festering, flesh-eating wound on his left arm." His voice was emotionless. Harry wondered how long it had taken him to sound like that when he spoke of this. "It pained him horribly, and he could not use magic to ease the pain—nor to do anything else, for that matter, as long as the Amotio Maga curse was in operation. His parents would only give his magic back when he pleased them, which was not often. They were trying to teach him the horrors of living like a Muggle."

Dumbledore's voice warmed and grew sterner, both at once. "It did not work. When Sirius came to Hogwarts, he had a sympathy for Muggles and Muggleborns, both, since he had been deprived of both his own magic and control over it for so long. He was Sorted into Gryffindor, and I undertook to protect him, as I could not do before." He paused one more time, then sighed. "All of it, Sirius?"

Harry looked at his godfather. Sirius nodded, or the curtain of black hair hanging over his face nodded. It abruptly occurred to Harry that Sirius hadn't cut his hair in months. That had always been a sign that he was depressed in the past. Harry felt an uncomfortable twinge of guilt for having failed to notice it.

Dumbledore sighed once again, and took a battered piece of parchment from his desk. He gave it to McGonagall, who stared at it and paled. She handed it past Sirius to Draco, who only stared at it without interest before handing it on to Harry. He took it with

trembling hands. He recognized his godfather's script, though it was far shakier than what he was accustomed to seeing. Sirius must have written this letter when he was younger, Harry thought, and the date at the top of the letter confirmed it.

November 2nd, 1967

Dear Professor Dumbledore:

I know that you don't know me, but my name's Sirius Black. I need your help. My parents hurt me. But I know you're the wisest and the best wizard in the world, because you defeated the Dark Lord, and you'll help me, because you always help children in trouble. Even my mother says so, and I think she's afraid of you. Please, please help me.

Sirius Black.

Harry gave the letter to Snape, and stared at Dumbledore. "And you didn't help him," he whispered.

Dumbledore dipped his head slowly. "I did not."

"Why not?" Harry could not imagine not responding to such a letter. Sirius had just been a child.

"Because," said Dumbledore, with a sigh, "at the time, I had no power to help a child in desperate need. I was not yet Headmaster of Hogwarts. And I had no legal means to challenge a powerful, pureblooded, Dark family for control of their elder son and heir. The Wizengamot would have laughed at any legal challenge, no matter how Sirius was being treated. A child's letter was proof only of a child's temper tantrum, they would have said."

Dumbledore spread his hands slowly. "I have spent most of my life since trying to make up for that great wrong, and I fear that I have only exacerbated it. I could not save Regulus Black. I could not save Sirius from nightmares of his brother's torture and death at the hands of Voldemort. I could not save him from the aftereffects of that Dark curse used to forge the mental link between the brothers. Only

Voldemort could have broken it, and it ended only when Connor Potter survived his Killing Curse."

"What aftereffects?" Snape asked the question with no emotion in his voice at all. Harry was glad. He could think of many emotions that would have made the room explode. Everyone was far too quiet. Remus had not stopped staring at Sirius, for one thing, and Hermione's tears were spilling silently down her cheeks as she read the letter.

"Sirius's mind has been—unstable since then." Dumbledore did not look at Sirius as he spoke. "He has had nightmares. And I asked him to take on a duty that I feared he did not have the strength to do, because we had a desperate need, and Sirius wished to be useful. First to guard Connor, by coming here to Hogwarts as extra protection for him, and then to tutor him in compulsion magic. Connor Potter also has the ability." Dumbledore closed his eyes. "I asked him, but I fear I made it sound an order. The Dark curse is prone to—twisting Sirius's good intentions, it must be said. Sirius seemed to take part of protecting Connor to be sabotaging Harry. And that came to a head today. I am sorry, terribly sorry, to you, Harry, and to Sirius. What mistakes I made, I made out of love, but that does not change the fact that they were still mistakes."

Harry became aware that his hands were clenched tight again. He tried to breathe, and could only utter a sound suspiciously like a sob, though he still knew he was not going to cry. He stared at Sirius, and thought how little he'd known of him at all, how the drinking and the womanizing were probably an attempt to live as normal a life as possible, how the dark circles under his eyes came from nightmares and not loss of sleep over his latest girlfriend.

"None of that excuses what you have done to Harry," said Snape then, and his voice was cold and utterly bereft of emotion or resonance. "Bound his magic and encouraged him to be trained into a weapon."

"I know," said Dumbledore, calm, accepting. "But that does not mean that the suffering of one can be made the reason for the suffering of others, as would happen if Harry were to unleash his magic." Harry

looked up to find himself facing a stare full of passionate Gryffindor resolve. Dumbledore was not going to back down from this one, he knew.

Well, neither am I. Harry bared his teeth and hardened his heart. This was for other people, not him. “But you made Sirius’s suffering the excuse for others’,” he said.

Dumbledore’s face went white. Snape’s chuckle followed after that, low and smooth and dark.

“He has you there, Albus,” he said. “And I feel free to say that, as Harry’s legal guardian, I will not agree to your binding his magic again. Nor will I consent to Harry being near Black again, nor alone with him. He is insane, and he tried to cause my ward’s death.”

“FUCK YOU, SNIVELLUS!”

Sirius was out of his chair in an instant, bowling towards Snape. Harry had time to react, and he snapped up a barrier in front of Snape, a wall of white-golden light. He hoped Sirius would have time to react in turn, but he hit the wall and fell backwards. A steady stream of whimpers slid from his mouth, and he held a hand to his face, blood running between his fingers. Harry suspected he’d broken his nose.

Snape hadn’t reacted except to breathe a little faster, but the glare he sent Dumbledore was deadly. “And I will definitely recommend that Black be removed from the school altogether,” he whispered. “That he would attack another professor, not once but twice, is unacceptable. And as for attacking students, the way he did today—it would not matter if it was Miss Granger here, or Connor Potter. I would still ask for, no, demand, his removal.”

Harry watched Sirius climb slowly back to his feet. Yes, his nose was broken. And Harry had caused that by no more than willing it to happen.

His magic reared around him, then settled on his shoulders in visible golden coils of power. Harry saw Sirius’s eyes trace them, and blank

hatred and rage turned to blank fear. Harry wound his fingers through each other.

He's unstable, he reminded himself, and looked at Dumbledore. "You must have had a reason to keep him here so long and let him train Connor," he said. "What was it?"

"I told you," said Dumbledore softly. "I asked him to train Connor in compulsion magic because he had the time to do so, the ability, and wanted to feel useful. I believed the duty would be light enough not to affect him adversely. I did not—"

"I can still do it."

Sirius sounded calm again. Harry looked back at his godfather, and saw that he'd lowered his hand. He'd probably cast a healing spell on his nose. His eyes were fastened on Dumbledore's face, and there was a deep, quiet desperation in them.

"I love both of these boys as if they were my own children," he said. "I know that Snivellus won't let me have any more contact with Harry now, for as long as he's Harry's guardian." The stare he sent over his shoulder said that he personally wouldn't let it be very long. "But I need the contact with Connor. Please, Albus. I'm sure that Lily and James wouldn't want you to stop letting me teach their son just because Snivellus is being unreasonable."

Dumbledore closed his eyes. He looked inexpressibly weary, but Harry knew he would assent before he did.

"Very well, Sirius," he whispered. "If you think you can control yourself around Connor, then you may continue training him." He sighed. "It would be the best solution, in any case. I simply do not have enough time to give Connor all the training and attention that he needs, while you do."

Sirius nodded fervently. "Thank you, Albus. I promise that you won't regret this."

"I will," said Harry, standing. He drew Dumbledore's gaze to him, and part of him reveled in the sick terror behind the older wizard's serenity. "Why should I consent to leave my twin alone with a man who's hurt me so badly, and could hurt him?"

"Because," said Dumbledore quietly, "Connor is doing well. He no longer unconsciously compels people. But he has much yet to learn. And it helps heal Sirius as well, to know that he's doing something."

"That's true, Harry," Sirius chimed in eagerly. "I promise that I won't hurt him. I could never hurt him. I could never raise my mind or my hand against him."

Harry turned and studied his godfather. It hurt to say what he felt he had to say next. "But you could do it to me."

Sirius flinched and turned his head away. "You don't understand," he whispered. "This Dark curse makes me react strongly to Dark magic. And you stank of it, and you chose a guardian who stank of it, and you're in Slytherin House, and it's just so hard, Harry—"

He began to cry then. He sank into his chair unattended. Remus was still frozen in the middle of the circle. Now he took his own seat, and drew Harry's eyes and attention back to him.

"I think," he told Dumbledore, "that Remus should know what you've kept from him, now."

Dumbledore tried to stare him down. Harry stared back, and let his magic unfold lazily. Even the barest touch of that power made Dumbledore narrow his eyes. Harry wondered how he felt the magic, if it was some horrific physical sensation.

"I know," said Remus then, quietly.

Harry stared at him. "You do?"

Remus nodded to Snape. "Severus mentioned it to me at one point. He said—he said I had learned you were being abused. That's what the stolen memories concerned." He closed his eyes. "And he also

said that the Oblivate had to be removed delicately. My sanity is at stake if it's just stripped from my mind. I know that."

"Yes." Harry felt the claws of his power flex around him. He was reasonably certain that he could remove the Oblivate, now, when he'd studied Remus's mind for a little while. "But do you know why Dumbledore Obliviated you rather than try to persuade you?"

"Harry," said Dumbledore sharply.

"He was afraid he couldn't convince you," Harry told Remus, ignoring Dumbledore. "He was afraid that you would endanger a web in my mind, one that had been there for eight years, since I was four. That web fucked up my mind and bound my magic." He ignored the very slight flare of golden pain from behind his eyes. He had expected it, since the gray Dementor had told him the part of the web that concerned Connor was still there. "They needed me bound, to be Connor's guardian. Dumbledore here is terrified of what I'll become when my magic is free, don't ask me why—"

"You could become a Dark Lord," said Dumbledore, and the room appeared to flicker into darkness as if a cloud had crossed the sun when his own magic surged forward. Harry wondered if he was even aware of the edge of compulsion that rode his voice. He did see McGonagall bow her head and twist as though trying to escape a yoke, and Draco made a spitting, hissing noise. Harry hoped they had managed to fight it off. "You could become as vast and dangerous as Voldemort, Harry. We are already fighting one of him. I do not wish to fight two."

"I swear that I will not," whispered Harry. "I wish to defend, to protect and serve."

"Then why not remain as you have been?" asked Dumbledore, his voice ringing with wistfulness. "You would be defending, protecting, and serving under the phoenix web, and doing it with an easy mind and clear conscience."

Harry found himself laughing. The sound tore at his throat, but he went on making it. The look of shock on Dumbledore's face, the shine

of mingled triumph and compassion in McGonagall's eyes, and the intent expression on Hermione's features were worth it.

"I want to defend, protect, and serve other people than just my brother," said Harry plainly. "And that is going to happen." He turned and met Remus's eyes. "Tell me when you want the Obliviate removed."

"I don't know," Remus whispered. "I—I have to think. I have to think about what I'm ready to know." He avoided Harry's eyes.

Harry suffered a brief surge of contempt. Remus probably didn't want to know, or wanted to think of some way to know about the abuse Harry had suffered and yet avoid losing his friends. Harry would not be at all surprised if he chose his friends, the way he had when he knew about that Halloween night.

Then he restrained his contempt. He could not simply step into Remus's mind and kick the barriers aside. That would make him no better than Dumbledore, no better than Voldemort. He had to respect Remus's free will, even if that led him to actions Harry despised, and only act against him when Remus actually did something to hurt him.

Harry faced Dumbledore again. "And now I want to know why you tried to put me back under the phoenix web," he said softly, "when I had said clearly that I did not want it. I want to know why you attacked Draco." Draco shifted closer to him. Harry put one arm around his shoulders, ignoring McGonagall's shock. She hadn't known about the Headmaster's attack on a student, then. Well, there is a first time for learning everything. "I want to know why you thought it was so important to have my magic and my mind bound."

"I have told you," said Dumbledore. "I feared that you would become the next Dark Lord."

Harry snorted. "When I was four?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, his voice unexpectedly grave. "No other child has ever had power of that magnitude at such an age, Harry.

Their power matures slowly, along with them. Tom Riddle was already a powerful wizard at eleven years old, but he did not suddenly leap full-blown into spells that would have taxed adults. He had been powerful since birth, and he went on refining his gifts. His magic gained ground because he learned new spells, new techniques, and new training. But yours...yours was simply and suddenly there, Harry, long after your birth, when to all appearances you were born a magically normal child. It had more than a touch of the unnatural about it. And given the prophecy, we could not let the future savior of the wizarding world grow up with a brother who would become a Dark Lord. We thought at first that your training would encourage the magic to lie still and accept refinement, but it wasn't enough. Your magic not only refined, it kept growing in raw strength, as if its sudden appearance in your life were not the end, as if it were drawing power from elsewhere. So, the phoenix web." Dumbledore let out a long sigh and passed his hand over his eyes. "Because the greatest opponent of power, and of the careless arrogance with which Tom used his power, is love."

Harry lowered his eyes. There were a great many things he wanted to say. He wanted to ask about the vates title that the Dementors had given him. He wanted to ask about what Starborn had said in his letter, about Harry having the potential to become a kind of wizard who was not a Lord. He wanted to ask about why they had to force him to love his brother, and not just rely on the natural love. He wanted to demand that Sirius be kept away from his brother.

But he looked at Dumbledore's face, and decided the first three would be unwise questions to ask, at least if he wanted to surprise Dumbledore in the future. And he looked at Sirius, and the words stuck in his throat.

They were so similar. They'd both endured, and managed to survive, suffering. They'd both been feared for their gifts. They'd both been asked to make sacrifices beyond what they could bear—though Harry knew, at least intellectually, that his sacrifices had been heavier than Sirius's.

It was true that Sirius hadn't hurt Connor. Not yet, pointed out a dark voice in the back of his thoughts. But his offenses had been against Harry himself, and if Harry chose to forgive them, he could.

Harry let out a long breath. "This is the way it's going to be," he said, and saw Sirius's head twitch towards him. "I don't mind if Sirius trains Connor—for now. If he ever hurts my brother, then he'll have me to contend with. The same if he hurts Snape, or Draco, or anyone else I care about."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, his eyes not moving from Harry's face. Harry stared back at him, and went on.

"I mean to have Professor Snape as my guardian, still." He ignored the firm grip on his shoulder. He'd expected it. "We'll deal with the Ministry. And I'm going to stay in Slytherin House and use my magic openly, the way I want to, free of its constraints."

"There are many things you do not know," Dumbledore warned him gravely.

"I know that," Harry snapped. "But I'm going to try to learn them, rather than avoid or ignore them." He couldn't help glancing at Remus as he said that. Remus flinched. The look in his eyes was odd now, a mixture of fear, pleading, and the yearning with which he'd watched Harry on the Quidditch Pitch. Harry stared back at Dumbledore. "I want you to stay out of my way."

"You're talking to the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Harry," said Sirius, who seemed to have recovered from his crying fit.

Harry gave him a glance he knew was withering. "Shut up, Sirius," he told him in exasperation. "I forgive you for what you've done to me, but I know what you are now, and I'm going to be watching you closely."

"Those are the kinds of things a Dark Lord might say," Dumbledore observed quietly.

Harry snarled at him, and felt the walls shake slightly. He snatched back control of his rage before he could do something unfortunate. “No,” he countered. “They’re the kinds of things that a very angry, very tired, very magically powerful teenager might say when he’s been forced to grow up and become a soldier too quickly and a sacrifice all his life.”

Dumbledore was silent, regarding him. Harry turned, meeting the other eyes in the room.

“I won’t demand anything from you,” he told them—McGonagall, Hermione, Remus, and Draco. “I will ask that you use your discretion when talking about what you heard in this room. And if you do something to oppose me, please think about what I’ll have to do in return.”

Draco was grinning, now, and not bothering to hide it. McGonagall nodded, her eyes shining with pride. Remus glanced away from him. Hermione was chewing on a piece of her hair and scowling fiercely.

“And now,” said Harry, rising to his feet, “I think I’m tired, and I have a party to attend in the Slytherin common room, and I’d like to walk back down to the dungeons under the protection of my legal guardian and my best friend.” He held out a hand to Draco, who clasped it, hard. Harry glanced once at Hermione, regretting the loss of an opportunity to talk to her alone. But... “Hermione, I’m meeting Neville in the library tomorrow after lunch. Can you be there?”

Hermione blinked and nodded. She would probably go to the library the moment she left the office, Harry thought, and try to look up most of the terms she’d heard here. He wished her good luck with finding them. He could use the help, assuming she decided to help him.

“So our state is one of—” Dumbledore began.

“Armed neutrality,” Harry cut in. “I won’t attack you or your allies, Headmaster, and I expect the same courtesy of you. I will defend my brother and anyone else I care about if you threaten them. I will defend myself against future attacks by Sirius.”

"That wasn't my fault," Sirius muttered.

"Shut up, Sirius," said Harry, without looking at him. It would take him a while to sort out his feelings for his godfather. He would prefer to do it away from him. "I will try to learn as much as I can about my magic, and the best ways to use it."

"There is so much damage you could do," murmured Dumbledore in a resigned tone.

"I prefer to think of it as how much good I could do," Harry corrected him, and then turned towards the dungeons, Snape and Draco immovable barriers on either side of him. He didn't wait to see how the others sorted himself out. He was almost tired enough to skip the Slytherin victory party.

Albus slumped against his desk as Harry and the others filed out of the room. Things were bad, but not as bad as they could have been. There was still a spark of hope. Sirius could remain in Hogwarts to train Connor. The wizarding world would find out about Harry's power, but they wouldn't fall in behind him as they might have had he declared an open allegiance to the Light. Harry was still, technically, in a truce with him.

Harry did not know the full story behind why Albus had called his power unnatural. He did not know that Albus felt his magic as a narrowing of every possibility in the world, a darkening and a stripping away of the future.

Albus gave Fawkes's perch one last sorrowful glance, then stood up, shaking his head. Things had gone as they would. There was no turning back. He had lost some ground, but he would win it again. Harry had met his eyes a few times, too directly, during their conversation. Albus had used Legilimency, and knew he still bore part of the phoenix web, the part linked directly to his brotherly duty.

It was enough. It would have to be enough. Albus would make it be enough. Things were not as dark as they had been before, in the final days of the First War with Voldemort, or those days of the war with

Grindelwald before Albus had felt comfortable enough to challenge him to single combat.

He had survived then, by loving the wizarding world. He would protect it now. Not all hope was lost.

He made himself believe that.

Snape saw Harry and Draco safe to the door of the Slytherin common room, where the boys stepped from the silence of the corridor into wild cheers, wilder catcalls, and the crooning and chirping of an overexcited phoenix. Snape shook his head and made his way to his own office. I hope the boy does not ask if he can bring the bird to classes. My answer will always be no.

He opened his office door, stepped inside, shut the door, and leaned against it for a moment. He let the emotions wash through him, burning triumph and bone-deep disgust and heart-high pride.

Harry had done it. He had done it. His strength was incredible, not only his strength of magic but his strength of soul. Snape did not think he could have emerged from that sort of binding and not immediately taken revenge on everyone who had ever done him wrong.

In fact, he knew himself not to be a very pleasant man, even with smaller wrongs than Harry had suffered. And he was about to prove it again.

Snape walked over to the locked cabinet at the back of the room, unlocked it, and took out the potion sitting on the back shelf.

Harry might have forgiven Black for what he has done, Snape thought, as he held up the bottle and admired the dark green shine of the potion. But I have not.

Chapter Eighteen: Pureblood Rituals

Harry wasn't sure who held the Daily Prophet towards him first the next morning when he walked into the Great Hall with Draco; it seemed to come from half a hundred hands at once. Harry shook his head and took his place at the Slytherin table, accepted a copy of the paper from Millicent, and then glanced around the Hall, letting his eyes travel slowly from face to face. He had avoided the reactions of the other Houses to his magic yesterday, except for a few select members of Gryffindor. It was time for him to look and see what they thought now.

Half of Hufflepuff House waved cheerfully to him. That would be Justin's work, Harry knew, and Zacharias Smith's. They tended to argue with anyone who said that Harry was the next Dark Lord, and given Justin's sterling good sense and Zacharias's bloody-minded stubborn logic, they usually got their way.

The Ravenclaws were more subdued, and the students in his own year avoided Harry's eyes. A few of the older students who tended to torment Luna were cowering in their seats. Luna looked up from reading the Prophet upside-down to nod gravely at him, and then returned to her reading. Harry kept his gaze cool as he looked, finally, at the Gryffindor table.

Neville was picking at his food. Hermione wasn't there. Percy Weasley looked as if he'd been up half the night vomiting. Ron avoided Harry's eyes. The twins just grinned at him.

Connor was glaring at him, and so were the other Gryffindors.

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to turn his back on his brother. He looked down at the article that adorned the front page of the paper.

It was typically melodramatic, of course, because the Prophet was like that.

HARRY POTTER: NEXT DARK LORD OR TRUE SAVIOR?

Harry's breath caught in his throat, and he groaned. They wouldn't—he couldn't believe that someone at the Prophet had really been overtaken by the same nonsense that Snape had spouted last year, about Harry being the true Boy-Who-Lived.

With dread, and yet a certain morbid fascination, he read on.

By: Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter, a student in Slytherin House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and brother of our very own Connor Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, has revealed himself to be a source of immense magical power.

It happened during a Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game, with Dementors on the field and a dramatic attack occurring in the Gryffindor stands. Sirius Black, a Professor at the school and a descendant of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, was reliably seen to be wrestling with Peter Pettigrew. Our devoted readers will remember him as the Azkaban escapee who excited and concerned many of us when, as reported in the Prophet, he appeared on the Hogwarts grounds, apparently intending to murder Connor Potter.

Soon after the attack began, the Dementors appeared, and Harry Potter flew to confront them on his Nimbus 2001 broomstick.

What happened then, no one seems quite sure, but we do know that young Harry's magic expanded around him, in an explosion felt as far away as the Prophet offices.

"I think he's really powerful," said Seamus Finnigan, a Gryffindor student in Harry's year. "Did you feel that?"

"I suppose he's powerful," said Ron Weasley, also a Gryffindor student in Harry's year, and the best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived. "I don't really know, though. I didn't think he was that strong."

"Please leave me alone," said Percy Weasley, elder brother of Ron Weasley, a seventh-year in Gryffindor House, and Head Boy. "I have a headache."

No Slytherin students were available for comment, and Connor Potter refused to do so. It is the understanding of this reporter that Lily and James Potter, parents of both the Boy-Who-Lived and our new magical prodigy, were at the game, but left before comment or a lack of it could be obtained.

However, there is no shortage of fascinating things to learn about the elder Mr. Potter. It seems that Harry caused rather a stir at Hogwarts last year, when he turned out to be a Parselmouth, and was rumored to be either possessed by the Dark Lord, or the new Dark Lord himself, during the unfortunate rash of Petrification incidents during the autumn months. While this reporter was unable to obtain information as to how that incident fell out, it is certain that Mr. Potter has acquired a certain aura of Dark magic. He also argued with his brother, the Boy-Who-Lived, and may actually have been present during the historic moment when Connor Potter killed the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets with the Sword of Gryffindor.

We have also found out that the elder Potters are under investigation by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for unspecified incidents, and that Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House, has become Harry Potter's legal guardian for at least the duration of the investigation.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was unavailable for comment...

That was as far as Harry got before a hand slammed down on top of the paper, knocking it to the tabletop and flattening it. Harry took a deep breath and looked up to meet his brother's eyes.

"How could you do that?" Connor whispered. "How could you hurt Sirius like that? He came back from Dumbledore's office yesterday a shadow of the man he looked before the Quidditch game. He told me that you didn't want him to be your godfather any more, that you'd rather have sodding Snape as your guardian." His face was flushed,

and his eyes shone in a way that reminded Harry of James's. "Why, Harry? What sin could he possibly have committed to make you reject him like that?"

Harry took a deep breath and stood. He could feel Draco surge up beside him, but he put out a hand, and Draco held his tongue. Harry had to be extremely careful of what was said here. He knew that Draco wouldn't be, tempted as he might be to blurt out the secrets of Sirius's dark past.

"That's what worries you?" he asked Connor. "Not my power, not my beating you in the Quidditch match, but this?"

"I care more about Sirius than some silly magical power, or some silly game," said Connor, trying to sound adult. It would have worked better if he weren't so angry. "I thought you did, too. I guess that was my mistake, huh?" Bitterness cut deep lines into his face.

Harry clenched his hands. Damn it, I can't tell him the truth without revealing Sirius's past, and I don't know if I have his permission to reveal it. He flicked a glance at the head table where the professors sat. Sirius was there, watching without expression. Snape leaned back from taking a platter of food in front of Sirius's plate and gave Harry an inscrutable glance.

It was his choice as to how to handle this, and Harry decided to be safe rather than sorry, especially given their audience.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But you don't know everything, Connor, and until you do, you can't understand. Ask Sirius to tell you everything, or to give me permission to tell you everything."

"Now you sound like Mum," said Connor, his nose wrinkled.

Harry flinched, remembering Lily's often-cried phrase, the one he had hidden behind himself last year. You just don't understand...

"I don't need to ask anything," said Connor. "I know that Sirius was telling me the truth, and that you're being as bull-headed as ever." He shook his head, his eyes hard. "I don't want you to come to my

training sessions any more. You can't keep from hurting Sirius, so I don't think you should be welcome during my private time with him. He should know that someone loves him and appreciates him for what he is."

Harry inclined his head, striving to keep his face expressionless. He was not sure how well he succeeded. Connor looked frustrated, which could have meant anything.

"All right, then," said Harry, and sat down, and started to eat his breakfast.

Connor leaned forward. "I won't let you ignore me—"

"Potter," said Millicent, and Harry had never known how coldly she could speak the name. "It might have escaped your notice, but you're near the Slytherin table. And you're threatening our House Seeker, who won the match for us yesterday—the one you lost thanks to your bloody stupid flying. Now get away from us before someone puts a hex up your arse."

Connor paused for a long moment. Harry knew him well enough to see him opening and closing his mouth without even looking up.

He didn't look up.

"Fine," said Connor, in a deeply meaningful tone, and turned to trudge back to the Gryffindor table.

"Bloody stupid sod," Millicent muttered, and sat down again, making a motion from the corner of her eye that Harry thought meant she was tucking her wand away. "He never learns, does he?"

"No, he never does," said Draco, and then leaned against Harry. "It's going to be all right, Harry."

Harry nodded slightly, and flicked a glance at Snape, whose face had relaxed enough to say the same thing with his expression. Harry did think it was curious that he needed to lean right over Sirius's plate again, his sleeve almost trailing in his godfather's goblet.

"Oh," said Neville, and his face lit. "That's a simple way to remember it. I never really thought of it that way before."

Harry smiled. "That's all right. It's not like I ever thought of it before, either." He turned the parchment around, so that Neville could see the whole of the table he'd drawn. The first third of it was a list of Potions, the second third a list of plants from Herbology, and the last part a small box that explained the connection between the Potions and the plants. "See? You can remember what ingredients a Memory Potion takes by remembering it as a series of plants, all of which affect—"

"Memory." Neville leaned over the chart, his eyes already devouring it. "Thank you, Harry." He hesitated, then glanced up again. "Thank you for not making me feel stupid."

Harry blinked. "You're not stupid, Neville."

"I feel like it," muttered Neville, looking down at the chart again as a blush crept over his cheeks. Harry felt Draco shift impatiently beside him. He hated Neville's self-deprecation, probably because he'd never had a moment of truly doubting himself and his purpose in his life. Harry, having been on the other side of it himself, understood it only too well. "Professor Snape thinks I'm stupid."

Harry sighed. He's my guardian, but he's so far from perfect that it's not funny. "Yes, he does," he had to admit. "But that doesn't mean you are, Neville. You can learn Potions, really you can. Just study the chart." He tapped a finger on the parchment and turned to welcome the person he'd felt hovering around the edge of his awareness for the last five minutes. He'd been slightly surprised that she wasn't already here when he and Draco came to meet Neville.

As Hermione drew nearer the table, and her glance flickered at Draco, Harry thought he understood.

"Hello, Harry," said Hermione quietly, and took a seat across from him. Her face was closed, quiet. She had a book held in front of her like a shield. Harry looked at the title, and was only mildly surprised to

see that it was Hogwarts, A History. Hermione often carried that one around.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, and saw her cast another anxious glance at Draco. "You don't need to worry about him," he added. "His bark is worse than his bite." Hermione's lips quirked in a smile.

"My bite and my bark are equally as deadly," said Draco, sounding offended, though Harry thought it very likely that he didn't really know what Harry meant. "If I'm a dog at all, I'm a Grim." He turned back to his Charms homework, but Harry knew he was on edge, listening and ready to attack the moment Hermione said something remotely offensive. Harry knew how much of an effort it took for him to sit here and just listen, instead of leaping in or calling Hermione a Mudblood. He did appreciate the effort it took, he thought firmly. He would have to find some way to show Draco that. It would never do to have him think that Harry was ignoring him, or thought better of the Gryffindor witch than he did of his best friend.

"You looked as if you wanted to do some research after the meeting yesterday," Harry told her. "What did you find?"

Hermione took a deep breath and laid Hogwarts, A History on the table. "I've found out that Headmaster Dumbledore is the fourth Light Lord to be Headmaster of Hogwarts," she said. "The first one was Cygnus Hedgerow, in the 1100's. And he was—he was kind of crazy, like Dumbledore. Did you know that he wanted to put up wards so that none of the students could actually practice magic? Just theory until they reached the age of eighteen, and by then they would already have left school. He was more than a little—"

Harry interrupted her gently. "What made you think of Light Lords?"

Hermione leaned forward. "That thing the Headmaster said about you being a Dark Lord," she whispered. Neville jumped a little in the seat beside her, but went on studying the chart of Potions and plants, and Harry trusted him anyway. It wasn't as though Neville would run back to the Gryffindor Tower and blab everything to the first person he saw, especially with the Gryffindors' hostile attitude towards Harry. "I thought I remembered something about the difference between Light

and Dark Lords that was interesting, and then I started reading about Light Lords who were Headmasters of Hogwarts. And then I remembered that there was a fifth one. Or, well, he was almost the fifth one. Except not really." Her fingers played with the edge of the page.

"What was his name?" Harry asked gently.

"Falco Parkinson," Hermione said, in a whisper, as if saying the name of another Slytherin student were tantamount to wearing the Dark Mark. "And he..." She shook her head, then flipped rapidly through the book until she reached a certain page and pushed it towards Harry.

Harry leaned closer to read.

Falco Parkinson. One hundred-twentieth Headmaster of Hogwarts, His term endured only one year. It was believed later that the stress of trying to be a Light Lord who set aside the magic of compulsion altogether was what caused him to have the nervous breakdown that forced his retirement.

Falco began by seeking out dragons, leaving the school untended for nearly a month while he did so. He came back with his left arm missing, but insisting that he had learned the secret of freedom from the dragons. Then he attempted to talk to the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest, spending much time that he should have spent with his students in secret negotiations that resulted in nothing. It is sometimes thought that the centaurs' wariness and suspicion of humanity dates from this time.

There were rumors that Falco Parkinson was strong enough to tame werewolves, breaking through the grip of the disease on their minds, and he certainly spoke with Veela colonies and the merfolk who have long dwelled in Hogwarts's lake. But in the end he resorted to compulsion to enforce his will, and apparently came into conflict with his own principles, and retired to live a quiet, and short, life at his own cottage in Surrey. On the last day of the summer term, he apparently sobbed continually, and repeated only the word, "Vates."

Harry leaned back from the book as if burned. He could feel a tingling excitement racing through his fingers. He looked up and met Hermione's eyes, though, trying as hard as he could not to betray any of it. He could see Hermione being the kind of witch who would get involved in whatever he was trying to do—the thing that didn't have a name, unless vates was it—purely for the sake of knowledge, of realizing things that she didn't know before. He couldn't lead her down that road. If she took risks for his sake, if she even became a pariah among the Gryffindors for his sake, then she had to know everything.

And he couldn't tell her everything until he was sure that he trusted her.

"What do you think this means?" he asked her.

Hermione shook her head, eyes gone large. "I don't know," she said. "The Headmaster called you a Dark Lord."

Harry nodded, encouraging her to go on.

"And I know that you're strong," said Hermione. "And I know that you have the ability to—"

Draco cleared his throat noisily.

Hermione glared at him, and seemed a moment away from putting her hands on her hips. But then she looked back at Harry, and nodded in resignation. The glare slipped from her face, replaced by a quiet, considering look that reminded Harry of McGonagall. "I remember what you said about being bound by the web," she said. "I remember what you said about wanting Professor Lupin to choose when he had his stolen memories returned." She paused again, and Harry could almost feel her awe at daring to contradict the Headmaster. And then she went ahead and did it anyway. "I don't think you're the kind of person who would choose compulsion over free will, the way that Dark Lords do. That's just not logical."

Harry couldn't help smiling at her. It seemed that Hermione had, after all, arrived by her own road at a place where Harry could trust her.

Hermione held up a warning hand, as though she could hear his thoughts and wanted him to reconsider them. "That doesn't mean that I think what you're doing is right," she stressed. "I think it's stupid, really, to go against the Headmaster. Both of you believe that You-Know-Who is wrong, and both of you value Connor. So I don't see why there should be this much disagreement between you. It's as bad as the goblins and the wizards at the Conference of 1584."

She leaned forward and stared hard into Harry's eyes. "But Connor's my friend, and you're interesting, and maybe right. So I want to help."

Harry let out a harsh breath. "Good. Then can you research the phoenix web for me? I need to know what it is and what it does, exactly, but I haven't been able to find much on it, and the Headmaster would notice if I searched. And I just don't have time to search."

Hermione smiled a little. "You need me because I'm a good researcher?" she asked.

"For right now, yes," said Harry, deciding to be honest.

"That's all right," said Hermione. "I'd rather be needed for that than just because I'm a Muggleborn."

"But you are," said Harry, not understanding.

"I know," said Hermione, standing up. "But I think what you do is more important than what you're a symbol of. I'll look up the phoenix web, and tell you about it." She nodded once to Harry, and then moved determinedly off among the aisles of books. Harry watched her go, brow furrowed, and wondering if he'd made a mistake including her in the meeting yesterday as a representative of the Muggleborn community.

"Harry?"

Harry turned back rapidly. That was Neville, and he flinched at the way Harry moved, but then he took a deep breath and met Harry's eyes. He was trembling a little.

"I don't understand what all of that means," said Neville. "But I'm your friend, Harry. I'm here too, if you need me." He blushed and looked down. "I d-don't know if you'll ever need fat, stupid Neville Longbottom, but I'm here."

Harry reached across the table and caught Neville's hand. "You're not stupid," he said. "You're brave. A true Gryffindor."

Neville flushed again, but this time with pleasure. "Thanks, Harry," he said, and smiled at him.

That was well worth it, Harry thought, as he sat back in his chair. He darted a glance at his best friend, and had to smother a smile. Even though Draco's all jealous over me now.

Harry slid to a stop outside the Slytherin common room, staring. Millicent and Pansy were waiting for him, which might not have been all that unusual, except that they knew the password themselves and usually didn't have this intent, predatory look. And at Millicent's shoulder stood her father, and behind Pansy's shoulder stood Hawthorn.

Harry let out a long breath and lifted his head. "Is there some point to this?" he asked. "Or did Starborn arrange this?"

He got a small smile and a tilt of the head from Hawthorn, but she said, "No, this was entirely of our own initiative, the moment we felt your power." She glanced at Adalrico and received a small nod, after which she went on. "We know, now, which side of the War we would choose to stand on."

Harry blinked several times. He had thought the purebloods would need more time to make up their minds. On the other hand, Hawthorn had already shown she could react fast to situations where fast action was called for, and he supposed there was no reason to think Adalrico wasn't similar. He nodded. "My brother's? Dumbledore's?"

"Yours," said Adalrico, his voice rough with exasperation. "Where is the sense that your magic gave you, boy?"

Harry inclined his head. "You realize that I'm going to have to ask you what you want and work out the formal terms of a negotiation. I'm hardly going to be leading a War yet. I'm still in school."

"There's no need for complicated terms," said Hawthorn, and pulled a knife from a pocket of her robe, unwrapping it from a silken cloth as she did so. Harry blinked when he saw that the knife's blade was made of silver, and the hilt was ebony. Hawthorn flinched as she looked at it, but her expression hardened. "You will know what this is," she said to Harry.

"I don't," Draco complained. "What is it?"

"Draco," said Millicent, with infinite gentleness, "go away. You can't be here. Your father hasn't made up his mind yet. You're not allowed to watch what we're doing."

Draco folded his arms. "I can be here if Harry wants me to be," he said.

"This is intensely private, Draco," Harry said, meeting his eyes and holding them for one moment. "And they're right. If your father hasn't made up his mind yet, then there's no way that you can be here, because you might accidentally tell him what you saw here. Or he might read it out of you with a spell."

Draco opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it. He bowed his head and shuffled dejectedly into the Slytherin common room. Harry turned back towards Hawthorn and Adalrico, his heart pounding with a crazy sort of excitement. He had never anticipated this, but now that it was here, he wondered how he could have anticipated anything else.

"It's going to hurt, isn't it, when the blade cuts you?" he did ask Hawthorn.

Hawthorn gave him a look. "Of course it will. It is silver, and I am a werewolf. But I don't care. It must be done this way." She crouched down and drew back her left sleeve, and Harry saw the gleaming black skull and snake of the Dark Mark.

He resisted the urge to put a hand to his scar, even as it began twinging. He watched as Hawthorn drew the blade firmly across the Mark, bisecting the skull. Rich blood welled in its wake, and the skin to either side of the slice turned red and puffy. But Hawthorn's face, when Harry looked at it, was calm, only a whiteness around the lips revealing her strain.

"I bind blood to blood," she said, "blood across blood, blood in honor of purpose and protection." She raised her eyes to Harry's face. "I am Harry Potter's ally. I will not take up magic or arms against him or his family. I will grant him protection should he ask for it or be in need of it. In any dispute about primacy, I follow of my own free will, and will abide by his decisions." She held her bleeding arm out to Harry.

Harry took the blade from her other hand and cut his own right arm. "I call blood to blood," he said, the words flowing faultlessly from his lips after a moment as he remembered the old ritual, "blood throughout blood, blood in honor of choice and change. I am the Parkinsons' ally." He sought Hawthorn's eyes for only a moment, to be sure it was the choice of her whole family and not just her. She gave him a short nod. Harry felt immensely heartened. "I will not take up magic or arms against their family. I will grant them protection should they ask for it or be in need of it. In any dispute about primacy, I accept their following, and will guard their interests as if they were my own." He touched his bleeding arm to Hawthorn's.

The entire corridor disappeared behind the blinding flash that followed. Harry heard Hawthorn crying out hoarsely, swearing in a language that sounded like German, and hoped that she hadn't been hurt. He hadn't anticipated that the light would be so bright, nor the reactions of their blood so fierce.

When he could see again, Hawthorn was staring at her left arm. It was healed, Harry noted, the swelling from the silver-blade cut going down.

No, he realized abruptly, staring. It was completely healed. The Dark Mark was an ugly scar on Hawthorn's arm, visible if one looked for it, but far fainter than it had been.

No Mark had taken its place. Harry was glad for that. A Mark like that would have meant he was a Lord, and he didn't want to be.

In the stunned silence, Adalrico laughed, his exaltation as fierce as a storm. "If I had any doubts," he said, "they are gone now." He almost snatched the knife from Harry, and bared his own Dark Mark. "Your Starborn did well, finding us this one," he told Hawthorn, and then turned towards Harry and smiled. Harry became aware that his magic was beating around him, radiating away from him and back from the walls in deep waves. He supposed, from the glazed look in Adalrico's eyes, that it was a good feeling and not an oppressive one.

Adalrico made the same vow, and Harry repeated it and touched his bleeding cut to Millicent's father's. This time, he was prepared for the flash of intense light that signaled a successful binding, and when he looked down at his right arm, he saw two silvery scars cutting past each other in parallel lines.

"Those will break open and bleed if we ever betray you," Adalrico told him, though Harry already knew that. "And our Dark Marks will return if you betray us." He paused, his eyes sparkling as they fastened on Harry's face. "I hope that you will never betray us. You are the better choice, in a world of Dark Lords and Light Lords."

Harry shook his head, even though he was smiling. "I'm only thirteen," he pointed out.

"Older than that," Adalrico retorted. "I can see the truth, unlike some people."

"Hush," Hawthorn said, very mildly. "Starborn reassures me that he is talking to Lucius Malfoy, and that Lucius is close to coming around."

"Lucius is a blind fool, and should have seen the truth before now," Adalrico said, getting to his feet. For a moment, he met Harry's eyes

directly, and his hand clutched Millicent's shoulder. "And you'll take good care of my little girl, I trust?"

Harry nodded, then looked at Pansy. "And you, too."

Millicent snorted. "Don't forget, Potter," she said, sounding like her old self, "we get to protect you, too." Her eyes lit when she smiled. "I'm looking forward to the next time your brother tries to hurt you."

"He's part of my family," said Harry. "So you can't lift your wand against him."

Millicent opened her mouth, then shut it, looking extremely peeved. Harry laughed, and then glanced at Adalrico and Hawthorn.

"What are you going to do now?"

"You could command us to do something," Adalrico said, watching him closely. "We would obey, of course."

Harry shook his head violently. "I don't—I don't like commanding people," he said. "Or compelling them."

"This is an order, not a compulsion," said Adalrico, and then glanced at his daughter. "I see what you mean about him," he said obscurely.

"Terrible, isn't he?" Millicent sighed, and then turned to Harry. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to lead."

"Maybe," said Harry, as he turned towards the Slytherin common room. "But today isn't that day." He did pause, remembering what Hawthorn Parkinson had told him, and looked back at her. "Wasn't it dangerous for you to come to Hogwarts today?"

Hawthorn smiled. "Not since I declared my allegiance to you. I am under your protection now."

Harry shivered a bit. Adults, witches and wizards who were more experienced if not as strong as he was, were depending on him for protection.

He did not want to let them down.

"Thank you," he said. For the vow, for the trust, for being willing to take silver on the arm... she would know that he meant any and all of those.

Hawthorn smiled at him. "You're welcome." Then she turned away to speak to her daughter. Harry slipped inside the Slytherin common room, and patted a sulking Draco on the shoulder.

"Your father will come around eventually," he said.

"He better," Draco said darkly. "What does it look like, when the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons can see sense sooner than the Malfoys? He's being an idiot..."

Harry listened to a tirade about Lucius Malfoy for the rest of the evening. It was the one way to make Draco feel better, and Harry much preferred having Draco happy to having him sulky.

"You will do well, Harry," Snape said softly, touching Harry's messy hair once more, but retracting his hand before he could muss it further. "They are only an Auror and an Auror-in-training."

Harry nodded.

"And we have discussed what to do." Snape's lips thinned for a moment. "We have spent the past week discussing little else."

Harry nodded again as his gaze nervously sought out the door of Snape's private rooms. This was where they had agreed to meet Kingsley Shacklebolt and Aidan Feverfew. It was the Saturday of the Ministry visit, and Harry kept wondering what they would do, what they would say, if they would really try to take Snape away from him...

"Has Black given you any more trouble?" Snape asked, probably to distract him.

Harry took the distraction gratefully. “No. In fact, lately he won’t really look at me, and broke down crying once in the corridor when he couldn’t avoid me.”

Snape smirked. Harry narrowed his eyes.

“What did you do to him?” he asked, just as a sharp knock sounded on the door.

“It seems that our guests are here,” said Snape, and swept away before Harry could question him further. He frowned, and then told himself to straighten up and look as neutral as possible. It probably wasn’t possible to look happy, not when he was this worried.

“Auror Shacklebolt, Auror-in-training Feverfew,” Snape was saying, his voice soft and courteous. “Welcome. My name is Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House.” He waited a moment, as though to allow the next title to fall on their minds. “Guardian of Harry Potter.”

“Where’s your ward?” That was Shacklebolt, a tall black man with piercing eyes that put Harry in mind of a lynx. He caught sight of Harry just then, and nodded slightly. “Never mind.” He rifled through a box of parchments that he held, and drew out one of them, which he held out to Harry. “Mr. Potter, would you mind explaining this?”

Harry took it, thinking it would be his original letter naming Snape his guardian. But it was, instead, the parchment he’d marked and sent to the Ministry last weekend, listing the coercive magic he was under. It said only phoenix web.

“Why, Auror Shacklebolt?” he asked, looking up and blinking. “It means just what it says. Unless you don’t trust the legal magic, of course.” He couldn’t entirely hide a smirk, and his magic rose around him, shimmering, in response to his amusement. The Auror looked as though Harry had taken a sledgehammer to his head.

“But—a phoenix web isn’t coercive magic,” said Shacklebolt, blinking and recovering. Harry could see the Auror-in-training now, who was in intense conversation with Snape. He was a slight young man with

pale hair and a habit of twitching his nose like a rabbit, and looked slightly awed of Snape. “This parchment means only that you think of the phoenix web as coercive magic. It’s perfectly legal.”

“Legal doesn’t mean morally right, Auror,” said Harry, leaning back against Snape’s desk. “You ought to know that, when so many Dark wizards got out of Azkaban after the First War by claiming they’d been under Imperius”

Shacklebolt made a slight, irritated gesture. Harry ducked his head to hide his grin. He and Snape had planned this, to knock their visitors off-balance as soon as possible and keep them there. Make this more about them than about us, Snape had said, and we are free.

“I know that,” Shacklebolt snapped. “But, as it happens, I know where this phoenix web comes from.” He leaned nearer and stared significantly at Harry.

Harry smothered a flare of irritation. How many people had Dumbledore told? Or was Shacklebolt’s knowledge something new, something that Dumbledore had told him in an effort to wrest back control of Harry?

“So?” Harry asked, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “All it means is that this web has a different kind of origin than you believed. It doesn’t make things right. It doesn’t mean I think of it as any less coercive.” He stared hard at Shacklebolt. “What questions did you come here to ask me?”

The Auror fumed a moment, then sighed. “Are you happy with Severus Snape?” he asked finally.

“Very,” said Harry, and waited.

“Why did you choose him?” Shacklebolt spat the words as if they were pebbles.

“Because he’s my Head of House,” said Harry. “He has been very supportive of me, especially last year when it was found out that I was a Parselmouth, and some people feared me for what they

thought was a Dark gift. He has trained me to control some of the wilder excesses of my magic, and assisted me in finding constructive things for my power to do." The last week had been...interesting in that respect. Harry found it much easier to brew the Wolfsbane Potion when his magic was darting about the potions lab, bringing ingredients over as he needed them. "He is the best guardian I could ask for."

"Not Albus Dumbledore?" Shacklebolt asked. "Not your own godfather?"

"I do not trust the Headmaster," said Harry bluntly. "And my godfather thinks that I have Dark magic merely because I'm a Parselmouth." He adopted an injured expression. "You can ask him, if you want, but he just wants to get me away from my guardian because he can't stand Professor Snape, and thinks all his magic is Dark. It's more a matter of schoolboy rivalries than wanting what's really best for me."

He thought, in amusement, of them questioning Sirius. Oh, yes, do let them question him. I don't think he will impress them much with his sanity, or his fitness as a guardian for a young wizard.

"What about your brother?" Shacklebolt asked.

"What about him?" Harry echoed blankly. He couldn't tell where the conversation was going now. Was the Auror about to suggest that Connor should be Harry's guardian instead of Snape?

"Do you feel resentment towards him?" The Auror's eyes raked him. "Jealousy? Some people in the Ministry and the Daily Prophet have suggested that you mean to take his place as savior of the wizarding world, and that's why you released your magic in public, at a Quidditch match."

"Are you supposed to be asking me questions like this?" Harry asked, imitating the tone that Snape used with Neville. "I'm sorry. I thought you were only supposed to ask me questions about my guardian, and whether I was in my right mind when I chose him." He glanced towards Snape. He had finished with Feverfew, it seemed, intimidating him into a quivering mass. "I want my guardian here if

you're going to ask me questions like that," he went on in a louder tone, and Snape's head snapped up.

"Has my ward committed some crime, then?" he asked, taking a step forward. "Why do you look as though you're facing a criminal, Auror Shacklebolt?"

Shacklebolt gave a frustrated growl, and Harry thought he understood. This would be the excuse that Dumbledore gave the members of the Order, to try to pivot them against Harry. He would say that Harry was jealous of Connor's prestige, that he was ambitious enough to try and make people notice him instead for his magic, and that the timing of his magic's release from its cage was not coincidence.

Now that he knew, he could fight it. Harry said, "He was asking me about my brother, if I was jealous of him. And I didn't think he was supposed to do that. I thought he was only supposed to question me about you."

"He is." Snape's voice was clipped. He moved the rest of the way forward, so that his shadow completely sheltered Harry. "Your partner has finished asking me all his questions, Auror Shacklebolt. If you have nothing else to say, then I suggest you leave."

For a moment, Harry thought the Auror might argue. Instead, he inclined his head, neck tense as a bowstring. "Very well," he said, almost spitting the words. "But the Ministry shall require another visit, in a few weeks, to know how your guardianship is progressing, and if Mr. Potter has made any progress in restraining his wild magic."

"Good day, Auror Shacklebolt, Trainee Feverfew," said Snape, and watched them go. Harry saw the awed look that Feverfew cast back at his guardian, and smiled. It seemed they might have won one ally, or at least swayed him closer to being impressed.

The moment the door of his rooms shut, Snape hissed and tore at his left arm. Harry hastily shifted aside the cloth, and stared when he saw the Dark Mark for the first time, ignoring the way it made his scar prickle. It was inflamed, the skull a deep sable and the snake an ugly,

poisonous green. Harry could only imagine how sternly Snape must have been controlling himself to appear composed in front of the Aurors.

“What does this mean?” Harry whispered.

“That the Dark Lord is returning,” Snape whispered back. “That somewhere, he is stirring, and feels happy, and we—ah!” Abruptly, he went to his knees, his lips clenched. Harry knew how severe the pain he must have been in was, that he permitted even that tiny gasp to escape his throat.

Acting on instinct, he touched the Dark Mark and focused his magic on it. Stop hurting him, he told the Mark, and hissed it aloud in Parseltongue, focusing on the snake, for good measure.

The color vanished from the Mark. Snape stared at him, then at the Mark, then at him again. Harry stepped away, shrugging self-consciously.

“I don’t know,” he answered Snape’s incredulous look. “It just seemed like something I should do.”

“It no longer hurts,” Snape said softly, and then stood, still giving Harry his piercing stare. For a moment, it seemed as though he might say something. Harry waited, rather nervously, for what it would be.

Then Snape turned away, and Harry let out a breath as the tension relaxed. It grew again with Snape’s next words, however.

“The Mark’s message remains the same. The Dark Lord is growing stronger, and you will be one of his primary targets. You are to remain within the school unless it is absolutely unavoidable, as for Quidditch practices, do you understand? And then you are to have people around you. I know that you have allies among the purebloods. Let them guard you. You are never to be alone with Black, not at all.”

“Surely you don’t believe that Sirius is working for Voldemort?” Harry protested.

"I believe in limiting your emotional damage as much as possible, Harry," Snape snapped at him. "And that means limiting your contact with him." He smirked as though something were funny. "Leave him to suffer with full knowledge of what he did wrong."

Harry opened his mouth to ask about that, but then Snape added briskly, "And, of course, you will not be attending any of the Hogsmeade weekends unless you manage to convince a professor who is not Black or Lupin to chaperone." Snape smirked at him again. "I plan to be occupied with brewing."

"What?"

They had an argument about that for a good half-hour, which Snape won, and Harry sulked about for another hour, until Snape sent him off to do Transfiguration homework. He was grinning as he prepared his parchment and ink in the crowded, chattering Slytherin common room, to the accompaniment of Fawkes's sleepy croons, and it took him a long moment to realize why.

It felt...good to have a parent again.

Chapter Nineteen: Strength of a Soul

Snape watched with his usual blank expression as Black drank his heavily drugged pumpkin juice. Behind the blank expression, of course, he was grinning, but no one else needed to know about that.

It was nearly three weeks now that he'd been giving the empathy potion to Black, and so far everything had worked out the way he had hoped. Black was reliving the same pain that Harry had suffered, the same memories of being bound and tortured and abused. That Harry had not experienced them as binding and torture and abuse at the time did not matter. Black retained his own perspective, even as he suffered the emotional and mental pain. He would know the burden Harry had been laboring under.

His gaze drifted down the table to Remus Lupin, who was picking at his food—understandable, given that the full moon was near. If Snape had not been reasonably certain that Lupin's mind would change when he finally allowed Harry to remove the Obliviate, then he would have been tempted to give Lupin the empathy potion, too. Both of them needed to understand what they had done to the boy. It was justice. It was right.

And it is so entertaining to watch.

A movement near the Slytherin table caught his eye, and Snape watched as Harry slipped out of the Hall. He knew where his ward was going. He would do homework for a few hours, then slip out of the castle, to watch his brother in company with Black. So far, Harry believed Snape ignorant of these little trips outside of Hogwarts, and Snape let him think so. It wouldn't do to make Harry feel caged. So long as he stayed within Hogwarts' wards, Snape could check on his presence and reach him easily.

Eventually, of course, Harry would have to learn that Snape took his guardianship more seriously than wielding it in petty power plays over whether or not Harry could go to Hogsmeade. But that time wasn't yet.

Black's fork cracked loudly against his plate. Snape looked back at him, and this time did permit a smirk. Black's face was pale, eyes

unseeing as he stared at the memories that Snape himself knew well, since he had put them into the potion when he was brewing it. That potion would have been impossible to make if he'd never had access to Harry's mind.

Perhaps he is reliving the times Harry cast pain curses on himself, Snape thought contentedly as he picked up his own goblet. Or the times that he was scolded for not studying faster, in case his brother might need him.

Snape hummed as he drank. He had other doses of the empathy potion in preparation. He thought they might make a fine Christmas gift for Lily and James Potter.

Harry glanced over his shoulder, and sighed with relief when he noticed no one coming after him. Millicent and Pansy had been very vigilant lately, as though they really had realized that Harry didn't spend all his time in the Slytherin common room or the library, and Draco was worse. If Harry left him alone too long, he returned to a turned back and a very tight grip on that bloody bottle.

But he thought he'd managed to fool them well enough tonight. A few gentle reminders of what homework was due in every class had made them yelp and scramble to work—and since Harry himself had purposely distracted them from that homework yesterday, he knew how much writing they still had to do.

He shivered as he slipped across the lawn, under the protection of a Disillusionment Charm, and towards the Quidditch Pitch, where Peter had asked him to meet this time. He checked the detailed map he'd created of the Hogwarts grounds, and relaxed when he saw the dot labeled "Wormtail" already in place, with no "Dementor" dots anywhere near it. Three times their conversations had been interrupted by Dementors, who still did not seem inclined to listen to Harry when he asked them to stop pursuing Peter. Harry was hopeful that this time Peter would get to tell him everything, since the phoenix web had calmed down so much. Harry hadn't felt its presence at all in over a week.

A conversation with Peter, and then time to go protecting, he thought as he lengthened his stride. Sirius and Remus would be running tonight, given the full moon, and they had asked Connor to go with them, or so Harry had surmised from overhearing his brother's mysterious hints. Harry was not about to leave Sirius alone with his brother in the Forbidden Forest, with Remus trapped as Moony and largely incapable of helping if something should—happen.

Connor's lessons with Sirius always leave him all right, if more prejudiced against Slytherins than ever, Harry thought as he stopped in the shade of the Ravenclaw stands and removed his Charm.

And they end at a certain time, Harry answered himself. Everyone expects Connor back at such and such an hour, and Sirius wouldn't dare keep him later. But in the Forest, when no one knows he's going along with Sirius and Moony? Oh, no. I should be there.

He really should have been there all along, Harry acknowledged, as he consulted his map by the light of Lumos and looked for Peter. His first duty was to protect his brother. He'd let it go shamelessly lately, frustrated by Connor's inability to speak to him without insulting him and enthralled by the intricate dances that he performed with most of the Slytherins.

But not tonight. If Peter isn't going to come forward—

"Harry," said Peter quietly, and then he was there, seeming to melt out of the darkness. Harry supposed he had to have got used to hiding, to avoid the Dementors and all the people hunting for him so long. "Thank you for coming. I want to tell you what I got interrupted on the last three times, so I'll try to keep it short."

Harry nodded.

"Have you heard of the Soul Strength Spell?" Peter asked, without further preamble. His eyes were wide, and his nose twitched now and then, the only remnant of the rat he showed in human form.

Harry blinked, taking the moment both to search his memory and give the phoenix web time to react. His mind remained blessedly dark and cool, and he shook his head. "No."

Peter smiled grimly. "It's a spell that answers a specific question the caster asks about the strength of someone else's soul. Dumbledore used it on us—" by which, Harry knew, he meant the Marauders—"when trying to find out who would have the strength to betray you and leave you open to the Dark Lord's attack, then go to Azkaban afterwards so that no one would find out what the Lord of the Light had done." Peter spat Dumbledore's title. The weariness Harry had heard in his voice at the beginning of the year had long since given way to ancient, dusty hatred. "No surprise, is it, that he found Sirius would crack if he was asked, and Remus would collapse without his friends, and James was too devoted to Lily? I was the strongest. I was the one chosen to make the sacrifice." Peter closed his eyes and expelled a long breath.

"He sent you to Azkaban primarily so that no one would find out what he'd done?" Harry breathed.

"Of course," said Peter. "That was the only way, with the phoenix web to make me look primarily jealous and a crime so heinous that no one would demand a really detailed trial. Otherwise, we either would have to put up with questions that might uncover the truth—a relative of that blasted Skeeter woman came quite close as it was—or having people know that Dumbledore was a man who would sacrifice children and lose all trust in him. And, of course, if we'd arranged it another way, they would have to do without the legend of the Boy-Who-Lived." He closed his eyes more tightly.

Harry stood there and stared at Hogwarts, and thought about that. His own sacrifice paled next to Peter's, he thought. The man had given up everything, and known he had done it because he was not the weakest but the strongest of the Marauders.

"And you must know," Peter went on, after a pause that Harry thought was shorter than it should have been, "that Dumbledore also used the Soul Strength Spell on you and Connor before the attack, to see which one of you could bear the burdens and sacrifices of being a

weapon more easily.” His eyes flared open, and seemed to pierce Harry. “And you were the stronger one.”

Harry felt himself begin to shake. He sat down in the grass and wrapped his arms around himself. He’d brought a cloak, but he was still cold. Of course he was, he thought absently. It was already the end of November, and the wind carried ice in its teeth.

“Harry?” Peter whispered. “Did you hear what I said?”

“I heard,” Harry whispered back, as quietly. He didn’t know why he was shaking. He’d heard everything that Dumbledore had done. He knew all his crimes. Why did he want to shake? Why had hearing something else unexpectedly hurt and upset him so much?

It’s a good thing that he used that spell, in fact, he told himself firmly. Imagine if Connor had been trained to protect you. You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you? You wouldn’t want to see him crack and fall apart because he couldn’t bear the burdens. Dumbledore chose wisely. He even tried to arrange things so that the person who would be the best savior would become the savior, even though that was really Voldemort’s doing. I bet the spell doesn’t test for things like compassion or gentleness. That’s Connor all over.

He felt Peter grip his arm. “I’m sorry, so sorry,” the older wizard whispered. “I wish there was some way I could turn back your life, Harry. Some way I could have carried you from Godric’s Hollow that night the Dark Lord fell. Your life would have been so much happier.”

“Yes, but what would the cost have been?” Harry said back. He could talk, if he didn’t try to talk too loudly. “Connor would have to bear everything all by himself, and you just said he couldn’t do that. They might have hunted and killed you for what they would see as a true betrayal. And I would be left without the purpose in life that I was always meant to fulfill.”

Peter made a soft frustrated noise. “That’s the thing about prophecies, Harry. They’re not as simple as—“

He turned his head abruptly, and Harry felt the cold of Dementors. He sighed. He knew it was no good. He couldn't force them to stop hunting Peter, and until he understood how to free them and what the consequences of it would be, he couldn't do that either.

"You'd better go," he said, but Peter had already risen to his feet.

"I will," he said. "Take care of yourself, Harry. But, please, think about what I said. Just because you were strong enough to go through what you have and survive does not mean they should have put you through it."

He transformed and ran then. Harry sat in silence for a little while longer, then stood up and shook himself. The moon was fully risen. Werewolves were running.

It was time to run with them, and guard his brother.

Harry swore under his breath as he stepped carefully along the path that Connor had taken after Padfoot and Moony. He didn't dare use his magic to run through the Forest as he had once before, since he was sure that the stir it would cause would draw too much attention from Sirius and Remus. His only consolation was that Connor couldn't keep up, either, and was pausing to rest every few hundred feet. Harry would catch up to him soon. He knew his brother had his Invisibility Cloak, but Harry had checked his specialized map before entering the Forest. There were thick trees ahead, and Connor would have difficulty changing his path much. Harry was relatively confident that he was still right behind his brother.

His own Disillusionment Charm was beginning to wear away, the ambient magic of the Forest nibbling at it. Harry snorted and waved his wand to renew it.

A werewolf's voice cut the sky. Harry smiled, then shivered slightly. The sound came from ahead of him, and he suspected it was Moony, voicing his exaltation the only way he knew how.

Harry stopped to rest against a tree, not wanting to stumble onto Connor too suddenly, and because he was tired from picking his way

over brambles and between patches of moonlight and darkness and what looked like darkness but was actually small hollows in which he could twist an ankle. He looked up at the full moon and surprised a yawn out of himself.

Moony howled again.

Harry abruptly straightened, then, as he realized that there was no way that second howl could have been Moony. It was much closer, and to the side instead of ahead of him.

That might mean it was to the side of Connor.

Harry wrapped his magic around himself and began to pass lightly through the undergrowth. He would draw attention, but that could not be helped. He would rather save his brother than stay in hiding.

That philosophy had been the source of much of his difficulty, he reflected, as he darted around the trees like a wisp of smoke. If he'd managed to save Connor undetectably in his first year, then Snape and Draco might never have suspected he was anyone remarkably different from what he seemed, and he could have remained as he was.

He grimaced. And would you really want that? Your magic would still be bound.

He jerked his thoughts back to the present. Now was not the time to be thinking about the phoenix web and how different his life was now that he knew about it. Now was the time to think about Connor and how he was going to defend him if the second werewolf in the Forest was aiming for him.

Harry followed the path down into a little hollow, leading him between a mounded ridge on the right and a bank of thick trees on the left. He froze as he saw a sudden glint of movement from ahead. He let out a slow breath when he realized it must be the trailing edge of Connor's Invisibility Cloak, and then smiled slightly when he heard his brother cursing under his breath. He seemed to be fine so far.

A scuffling, snapping sound came from the top of the ridge. Harry looked up, and saw a dark, crouched shape silhouetted against the moon.

Then the shape howled, and leaped downhill, heading straight for Connor.

Harry shouted and broke his own Disillusionment Charm. He saw the startled shuffle that was Connor turning towards him, but he didn't care. There was a werewolf coming, and his brother was standing there like a...like a...

Like a child, which was what he was.

Harry flung himself into motion, and arrived, thanks to the lightness his magic inspired, between the werewolf and Connor. The werewolf saw him and altered its stride, impossibly fast and graceful for such a large beast. Harry didn't have time to see much before it spun to the left and then whirled around to face him, paws raking long furrows in the earth, but he did see black fur and eyes full of a wild, alien fire. This was a werewolf not under the control of the Wolfsbane Potion.

And now Harry could see the moonlight striking the long stripe of gray fur that ran from the tip of the immense black wolf's muzzle to his tail.

This is Fenrir Greyback, Harry thought, and felt his heart leap from immobility into sudden motion.

His mind cleared as it did so, though, and his eyesight sharpened. This was the kind of battle he had been trained for. He knew exactly where everyone was. Connor was behind him and slightly to the left, with the way he'd turned. Greyback was in front. The ground beneath his feet was mostly solid, but slippery with rocks and dirt and leaves; he would have to remember that.

A slight snarl was the only sound Greyback made before he charged, bearing down on Harry like the Killing Curse. Harry shifted his grip on his wand, and saw the werewolf's eyes turn towards it.

He didn't use it. He flung his magic forward instead, edging his voice with the same will that he had once used in these same woods to crack an egg-shaped stone and save Draco's life.

"Stop."

Greyback rolled over as though someone had slammed him all along his left side. He whimpered as he rolled, but he came back on his feet almost immediately, and this time he was closer to Connor. Harry turned to cover his brother. He heard Connor ask a breathless question, but he didn't have the time to listen. Werewolves were highly resistant to magic. He had always known that. It was part of what made them so dangerous, even to highly trained adult witches and wizards such as Hawthorn Parkinson.

It was a problem when facing Greyback, but Harry did not intend to let it defeat him.

He looked deeply into those wild eyes, burning with hatred and bloodlust, and sought some trace of humanity, the odd recognition that Remus had displayed on the last full moon night and again at the Quidditch game. If he could find that part of the werewolf, could connect with it, then perhaps he could convince Greyback to back off and not hurt Connor.

He found nothing like it. Perhaps that only worked with people who were under Wolfsbane Potion. Harry nodded, and slowly the priorities in his mind shifted. He could feel his objections shrinking, becoming small and cold and silent. He lifted his wand and held it towards Greyback, in spite of the fact that he probably wouldn't need it.

He was preparing himself to kill, for the first time in his life.

Greyback bounded this time, hitting the ground with all four feet at once and bouncing off, aiming at Harry's chest and head. Harry focused and sharpened all his will, and held it in a shearing blade a few inches in front of his face.

He let it go when Greyback was too near to avoid it.

Greyback screamed, his face and his muzzle tearing open as he landed and plowed into the dirt a few inches from Harry's feet. The strike hadn't blinded him as Harry had meant it to do, though, nor killed him. He scrambled up, snapping his jaws, well inside Harry's personal space.

Harry didn't have time to step back before the heavy body hit him and bore him to the ground.

He tried to shout for his brother to run, but his air was gone. He grabbed Greyback's neck, holding him there as long as possible, wanting to give Connor some time to get away as well as himself a moment to find a weapon that worked.

Greyback's jaws snapped in his face. Harry's arms were already shaking from the effort it took to hold his head back.

He heard feet shuffling, and hoped Connor was running. He tensed, prepared to strike if Greyback should get distracted.

The werewolf didn't even look around, though he must have been able to smell Connor. His claws were plunging into the ground on either side of Harry now, driving him forward. Without his magic lending strength to his limbs, Harry was fairly sure he would have been bitten already.

Revelation struck him like lightning.

He didn't come to assassinate Connor. He came for me.

Harry had just finished processing that when something pale flashed past his vision and struck Greyback. Once again, the enormous werewolf went rolling, this time with a whimper that he could not quite escape, and the sound of cracking bone. It seemed to be his night for it, Harry thought, as he stood and wiped dirt off his robes. He was trembling slightly, and it took him a moment to understand what he was seeing.

Greyback, his tail to the trees, faced a smaller, paler werewolf, probably fawn in color, though it was hard to be sure in the moonlight.

He was snarling continuously, and she was replying in the same language. Harry was fairly sure that she turned her head towards him for a quick glimpse, and that he saw the hazel eyes of Hawthorn Parkinson in her face.

Greyback charged while her head was turned.

Harry had no time for finesse. He knew only that he had promised to protect Hawthorn and her family, and here she was, risking her life for him. Granted, their bargain went both ways, but he was the stronger. He should be the one doing the defending.

He reached out and called up the ground at Greyback's paws with the force of a Reducto. It tore itself apart in a fountain of earth, and Greyback screamed, halted and caught halfway through his leap. Harry heard another sound of cracking bone, and this time, when the black werewolf touched down, his left foreleg dangled uselessly.

Hawthorn struck at his right shoulder, silent and blinding fast. Her fangs flashed, and Harry saw a bleeding wound sprout just to the side of the gray stripe. Greyback howled in misery, and snarled for a good show of it, and then turned and limped furiously across the path and up the ridge. Hawthorn snapped at his heels for a moment, then spun back and trotted over to Harry, sniffing at him.

Harry held out a shaking hand. Yes, it was Hawthorn. She graciously permitted him to rest his fingers on the end of her muzzle, and met his eyes with the same grave, calm politeness that she showed in human form. Harry found that recognition in her gaze that he had missed in Greyback's.

"What am I?" he whispered. "Do you know?"

Hawthorn only stepped away from him, with a speedy flowing movement that proclaimed how very much she was a wild creature at this moment, and looked up the slope. Harry tensed and turned, but it was only Adalrico, his hand loosely clasping his wand.

"Good as your word," he murmured, sounding satisfied. "Lucius is a bloody fool."

Harry let out a sharp breath, and glanced along the trail. “Have either of you seen my brother? He would have been wearing an Invisibility Cloak—“

“Then we wouldn’t have seen him,” said Adalrico.

Hawthorn snarled at the older wizard and began sniffing up the trail. Harry relaxed and started to take a step after her.

“But if you mean the younger wizard currently blubbering like a fool in Black’s arms,” said Adalrico, “then yes, he’s well enough.” He tilted his head at Harry in curiosity. “I would have thought you would be more concerned about the other one.”

Harry frowned. “Other one?”

“We were following Greyback before he transformed,” said Adalrico. “He was muttering something about a second death, something to punish the son of someone reluctant to help raise the Dark Lord—“

Harry never doubted the conclusion his mind snapped to.

Draco.

He ran full out for the school, ignoring the trailing yelp behind him. The trees blurred past him, and his feet no longer touched the ground, and still Hogwarts loomed on the other side of the trees, impossibly far away.

Draco yawned and put his book down, rubbing his eyes. It was all very well to study Charms for hours on end, but he wished Harry would come back—

Harry.

Draco sat up, not swearing, because a Malfoy did not permit profanities to cross his lips in front of a common room full of observers, but angry enough to do it. Harry had maneuvered them all again. Draco could see it now, the continual pattern of fun yesterday

that had distracted and cajoled them away from their studies. Harry had chattered at them about there being other things to do than homework, and landed them all with it today so that he could have some time alone.

Draco stood and marched up to their bedroom to put his Charms book away. He was going out into the corridors, curfew or no curfew, and look for one Harry Bloody Potter.

He stepped into the empty room—Vince and Greg were with Pansy, who was trying to teach them both some Potions basics they should already have grasped, and Blaise was in the library—and then paused. Something was...out of place. The room was empty and dark and quiet in the way that it should be, but something was still out of place. Draco couldn't have said what it was, and knew his father would be annoyed with him for that. The curtains did not tremble, as if in a strong wind, but it felt as though they should have. The air did not tense and tighten with a spell resting unspoken on a tongue, but it should have.

Draco muttered to himself, to distract himself from the sudden nervousness, and then bent down to put his Charms book in the trunk at the foot of his bed.

Something under the bed hissed.

Draco jumped back, the pain of his sudden headache from powerful and malicious magic good as a shout of warning. Jaws snapped where his ankle had been, and then the thing slithered into the light.

Draco knew at once it was a magical item, no natural snake. It was just too dark, and its green scales had the sheen of jewels. It inched towards him, silver fangs bared and ruby eyes gleaming. It stank of cinnamon and almonds, and Draco shivered. He recognized the scent from several deadly poisons that had been in their Potions textbook.

He opened his mouth to cry out, and then felt the unmistakable presence of silencing wards on the bedroom. The door locked with a sudden little snick in the same moment.

The snake waited for a moment. Draco stared at it, and felt his mouth dry and his hands clench helplessly in front of him. Malfoys did not become afraid, but it seemed as though he were afraid now.

The snake lunged.

Draco barely escaped. He was sure he felt the fangs tear the leg of his trousers. He scrambled to his feet, his hands shaking so hard he could barely draw his wand. Then his nerves stood up on end and shrieked.

He couldn't see the snake.

He stamped down and spun to the left, trying to think of something that would affect a snake which was clearly made of Dark magic. Serendipity, and not any good planning, saved him. The snake had been waiting to his right, and its next strike missed, too.

Draco stumbled another step away, and rammed into his bed. He aimed his wand as nearly straight as he could, and shouted, "Stupefy!"

The snake moved, and the Stunning spell missed it entirely. Draco jumped up on the bed with a shriek. Now he didn't know where the snake was, under the bed or crawling up the posts. Fuck, the thing was fast.

He caught a glimpse of green off to the side, and shouted, "Petrificus Totalus!"

He missed again, at least if the way the coil vanished instead of freezing was any indication. Draco climbed to his feet, balancing as best as he could on the bed, and concentrated on means of lifting himself. He would have to hope that the damn thing couldn't fly.

"Wingardium—" he began.

The snake boiled up and across the sheets at him. Draco shrieked and lost the thread of the spell. He grabbed the nearest thing at hand, which happened to be his favorite pillow, and slammed it down on top of the snake.

Fangs burst through the pillow, shredding the cloth and missing his hand by an inch. Draco let the pillow go and hopped backwards again, nearly in tears from fury and frustration and terror.

The door abruptly exploded.

Harry swept into the room in a roil of power and Dark magic and the scent of roses, at least to Draco. He cried out, this time in relief, and saw the snake freeze on the bed and turn towards Harry.

Harry immediately began hissing. The snake swayed back and forth as it listened to him. Harry went on hissing, his voice low, urgent. Of course, Draco thought everything in Parseltongue, which he couldn't understand, sounded urgent. Harry had a hand out now, coaxing the deadly toy towards him, his hissing never faltering.

The snake moved again, and Draco screamed again in spite of himself. This time, though, the snake shot away across the floor, coiled around Harry's leg and then his wrist, and became motionless, a bracelet clasping its tail in its mouth. Draco felt the aura of Dark magic retreat.

Harry closed his right hand over the snake and squeezed. It crumbled to powder. Harry stamped on the powder for good measure, and then a wind swept into the room and marched the remnants past the kindling of the door. Draco didn't think the wind was a coincidence.

He realized, dimly, he was shaking. So this is shock, he thought, in wonder.

Harry stared at him, his eyes desperate. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Draco managed to nod. He was, wasn't he? The snake hadn't bitten him. He did lean down and check his ankle, but he couldn't see any bite there.

He didn't have time to straighten up before Harry half-knocked him down with an enormous hug. Draco hung on and closed his eyes. There was nothing shameful about holding on to someone else when you'd nearly died, he thought, even for a Malfoy.

"Thank Merlin, Draco," Harry was murmuring, voice half-hysterical. "First the werewolf, and then this. Merlin, if Adalrico hadn't said something, I wouldn't have known, I would have been too late, you would have died..."

Draco opened his eyes and managed to see over Harry's shoulder, to his bottle, sitting on the table. It was entirely fierce, dark purple, the color that meant Harry's protectiveness towards him was in full force. Then Draco frowned. He noticed a bit of black, a color he hadn't ever seen before, in the corner of the bottle.

"What's that?" he asked. His voice was shaky. Draco frowned more fiercely. That wouldn't do around Father.

"What's what?" But Harry did him the favor of turning around and looking, so that Draco didn't have to speak again.

Harry blinked when he saw the bottle. "Huh," he said. His voice was flat.

"What does it mean?" Draco insisted. He already sounded stronger. Good. Being in shock does not present a good impression. He couldn't seem to do anything about the hold his hands had on Harry's shoulders, though.

"It means that if the person who did this was in front of me right now, they'd die," said Harry, his voice still flat. "I probably wouldn't even mean to kill them. They'd just crumple with their hearts stopped."

"Oh," said Draco, and then blinked again. "What was that about a werewolf?"

And then he fainted, because there was apparently only so much that even a Malfoy could take.

Harry hovered beside the bed; Madam Pomfrey had managed to make him back off, but she couldn't make him leave completely. "And you're absolutely certain?" he asked. His voice sounded tired to his own ears.

"I'm absolutely certain," said Madam Pomfrey. She sounded exasperated, but Harry didn't really care. He nodded sharply. He had assumed that Draco had gone white-faced and limp in his arms because of the snake's poison. But it seemed that he really was fine.

"Harry."

Harry turned in startlement. He had expected the voice eventually; after all, he couldn't stay in the Forest forever. But he hadn't known that Connor would come back to the castle so quickly, nor that Harry and the hospital wing would be the first things he would seek out.

He nodded to his brother, whose eyes were focused past him, on Draco. "Connor," he said.

"I..." Connor let the word fade away as though he didn't know how he would continue, assuming he wanted to continue. Then he said, with a determined attempt at cheerfulness, "Going to be all right, is he?"

"We think so," said Harry, ignoring the way that Madam Pomfrey snorted and muttered about presumption. He might not be a mediwitch like she was, but he was the one who had played a part in Draco's diagnosis as much as she had. Without his summary of what had happened in the bedroom, she wouldn't even have known what to look for. "A magical snake was loose in our bedroom, trying to bite him."

Connor blinked. "What happened to it?"

"I destroyed it," said Harry, and clenched a hand as he thought about how. He wished that he had another snake like that with him now, so that he could destroy that one, too. He did not want to use his magic for anything else. It had rampaged up and down the hospital wing until Madam Pomfrey, without glancing away from Draco, had

snapped at him to control himself. Harry had therefore spent his time since dreaming of revenge.

"Maybe you should have kept it?" Connor asked tentatively. "So you could know who sent it?"

Harry shook his head. "It might have come to life at any time. I only calmed it because I'm a Parselmouth. It was best to destroy it."

Connor nodded uncertainly, and they stood there in silence for a while more. Harry glanced at Draco, and judged the speed of his breathing and the color of his face. He thought it was all right. He thought Draco was all right, and that was such a huge change from the mood he'd been in as he ran back to the castle that he was shaking from the fierce contrast.

"Harry."

Harry glanced hard at his brother. There was a new tone in his voice, and he had one hand extended.

"Thank you for saving my life," he said formally.

"Sure," said Harry, and clasped his brother's wrist back. He thought this gesture should probably mean more to him than it did, but a lot had happened since he first thought Connor might be in danger. His gaze kept going back to Draco, even when he didn't mean it to. He was a target, as Snape had so snippily informed him some time ago, and even Connor he could accept as a target in a certain light. But someone had tried to kill Draco, just for what his father had done, and maybe because he was Harry's friend.

Harry could not accept that. He wanted to know who it was, and he wanted to destroy that person.

"I'll leave you here," Connor whispered, and his hand tightened on Harry's shoulder for a moment. "I'll explain things to Remus and Sirius."

"Thanks," said Harry tiredly, and leaned his forehead against the bed as his brother walked softly out of the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey hustled off, probably to fetch clothes for Draco. He was tired. Spell exhaustion was catching up to him, and all the running he'd done earlier in the evening, and the sheer effort of using so much wandless magic at once. He yawned.

A hand brushed his shoulder. Harry looked up, blinking through eyes already hazy with sleep, and saw Snape standing there. He nodded. The other Slytherins would have seen the door smashed to kindling. They had certainly seen it when Harry hurtled past them towards the hospital wing, Draco borne behind him on a wave of golden-white wind. They would have fetched him.

"What happened?" Snape asked.

Harry blinked at Draco. "Someone turned a snake loose in his room," he said. "A Dark magical artifact of some kind. I came in and destroyed it, but I thought he might have been bitten, so I brought him here."

"How did you know?" Snape's voice was distant and lulling. It was very easy to speak in response to it, and Harry did so. He had felt lately that he could be honest with Snape, anyway.

"Adalrico Bulstrode told me," said Harry, and yawned again. "He heard Fenrir Greyback talking about an attempt to murder someone in the castle, right before he attacked me."

Snape's hand was abruptly on his shoulder again, gripping like fishhooks. Harry blinked at his guardian, brought half-awake again, but not understanding the terrible expression in the dark eyes.

"What?" Snape said.

Harry tried to shrug off the grip. It refused to be shrugged. "Please let me go," he said, keeping his voice even.

Snape did, but his voice was as firm as his fingers had been. "What happened?"

"I was in the Forbidden Forest, guarding Connor," said Harry. "Fenrir Greyback came for him. The people who are trying to resurrect Voldemort probably sent him." He considered telling Snape that Greyback had been trying to assassinate him, then discarded the notion. He didn't have any proof, just the flashing brief second when Greyback had seemed more interested in him than Connor. The werewolf had probably thought of it as eliminating the greater threat. And besides, then Snape would be more unreasonable than he already was. Harry had survived. He was all right. "I got in the way, and he tried to bite or kill me. But I defeated him with the help of Hawthorn Parkinson, and he ran away. Adalrico Bulstrode was with her. He was the one who told me that Draco was in danger." Harry turned back to Draco. He was stirring towards wakefulness now, muttering, his eyelids fluttering.

"That is the end of it," said Snape.

Harry blinked at him. "The end of what?"

"The end of your little trips outside the castle's wards." Snape's eyes narrowed at him. "Yes, I knew about them. And you are not to venture outside of Hogwarts again unless you are practicing Quidditch or I am with you. I thought I could trust you to take care of yourself. It seems I was wrong."

"I did take care of myself," said Harry, indignant. I'm glad I didn't tell him that silly idea about Greyback wanting to kill me or make me a werewolf, not if he's going to be as silly as this. "I'm alive, and I prevented anyone from getting bitten." He felt Snape wasn't giving the proper weight to that.

"You nearly died."

It was worse that Snape didn't yell. He simply spoke the words fiercely, and made Harry feel as though a cold wind had taken up residence in his bones. He looked at Snape's face, then quickly down and away. What he saw there would be natural on Lucius Malfoy's face when he was looking at Draco, or Lily's face when she was

looking at Connor. It made him intensely uncomfortable when it was focused on him.

“Doesn’t that matter to you?” Snape whispered. “Doesn’t it matter, that you would hurt me and Draco and your brother if you died?”

“Of course it matters,” said Harry. “But I would sacrifice my life in an instant if it meant saving one of you. You already knew that.”

“That is the thing that we must rid you of, then,” said Snape. “You will not be free until you begin to value your own life more.”

Harry glared at him from beneath a lock of dark hair. “I’m fine.”

“You will still obey me,” said Snape. Harry couldn’t read him at all now. His face and voice both took on the weight and inscrutability of dark stone. “No venturing outside Hogwarts except for Quidditch practice or if I am with you. No going into the Forbidden Forest again, for any reason. You will spend a portion of every day with me, in which you will tell me what you plan to do that day and where you are going.”

“But...that would take up more of your time,” said Harry, who knew how much Snape valued the hours he had where he didn’t have to be teaching or eating in the Great Hall.

“I said that I was not your guardian only in name, Harry,” said Snape calmly. At least Harry could tell that he was calm now. “I meant that. Other children have parents, and have had them all their lives. You have not. You have one now. I promise you, cross me and you will learn how seriously I take this.”

Harry shook his head wildly. “What if something happens to Connor or Draco because I’m not there?”

Snape leaned towards him. “It is parents who should think that way,” he said. “Not thirteen-year-old boys.”

Harry clenched his fists and forced himself to calm down. His magic was on the verge of boiling one of Madam Pomfrey’s precious potions.

"Regardless of whether or not I should, I am," he said. "This is what I am. This is what my training made me. I don't want to be treated like what you think I should be. I want to be treated the way I am."

Snape studied him in silence. Then he said, "And what need do you have of a guardian, then?"

Harry shut his mouth. "I still like the time I spend with you," he said at last. "I'm grateful for your help with the Ministry. And thank you for teaching me to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. I even—I even want a parent, in a way. But the restrictions have to be loose enough that I can still do what I was born —"

"Made."

"—born to do," Harry corrected stubbornly. "And that's protect the people who are important to me."

Snape studied him again. Harry had no idea what he was seeing, and so stood silent, staring back, only reaching out a hand to stroke Draco's hair when the other boy made a sleepy little sound.

Snape dipped his head. "Very well, Harry. If you come and speak with me, then we can work out exceptions to those restrictions at times when you think there might be danger. Until then, I shall expect you to obey me."

Harry relaxed. It was the best compromise he could hope for. And he really did owe Snape something. He couldn't simply take from the guardianship; he had to give, too, though Merlin knew why Snape wanted the things he had to give other than protection.

"Thank you, sir," he said, and turned to answer Draco's questions. Snape laid a hand on his shoulder one more time, and then left the hospital wing.

Snape returned to the dungeons in a rage so deep that he was glad, in a distant fashion, that he had not encountered anyone along the way. Venting his fury would have been enjoyable, but Dumbledore probably couldn't have kept him out of Azkaban if he'd done it.

He stepped into his offices and examined the brewing empathy potion. Then he shook his head slightly.

I will reserve those doses for Black, he thought. Well, perhaps one for James, if I think of no better punishment.

He turned towards the racks of potions, and studied them all, one by one. The rage sank into him, deepened, and turned cold.

In the end, he decided, very calmly, that none of them would work. None of them were vicious enough. He didn't want to hurt Lily Potter for what she had done, nor kill her, nor make her suffer the way he was doing to Black.

He wanted to annihilate her. He wanted to obliterate her.

He went to read one of his Dark Arts books. He highly doubted that anything he found there would satisfy him, but it would turn his mind in the right directions. At least it kept him from contemplating the awful, overwhelming scope of what it would take to heal and free Harry's thoughts, and his own heart-stopping terror when he had heard that Harry was in danger.

Interlude: Revelations Upon the Waves of Air

December 1st, 1993

Dear Mr. Potter:

You have done well, you know. I am pleased at your progress. And I am pleased that you have taken my words to heart, and that you no longer seem to fear your own magic. The release of your power is long overdue, and I think it will yet benefit our world. I am not like most of those people around you, you know, who fear what you could become. I am afraid for you, but that is a different thing.

But I greatly fear what could happen if some of your attitudes do not change soon. This is a war. It will be a war until Voldemort is finally and absolutely destroyed. You know this. Yet still you hold back when you could have destroyed an enemy; still you stayed your hand for so long that Fenrir Greyback only escaped wounded, and did not die as he should have. You must learn to harden your heart, Mr. Potter.

I would never advise you to compel anyone alive. I will not advise you to threaten others onto your side. But there are some now alive who are your implacable enemies. No matter how long you give them, they will not come back to you. They have made their choices. When one of them tries to kill you, strike hard, and strike fast, and do not delay. It is your responsibility, if you do become the kind of wizard who is not a Lord, to protect yourself against that kind of murder attempt. We, all of us, need you alive too badly.

I can give you two names now. I was raised among them, your enemies, and I know two of them who will never turn back from Voldemort's cause. Fenrir Greyback is a monster who must be destroyed, as he has destroyed the lives of so many others. Walden Macnair is another. He will never relinquish his hatred and his bloodlust. He has made sacrifices already for his cause. For no other reason than because Voldemort asked it of him, he murdered his own wife.

And now, I must give you a bit more information on that matter which I wrote to you about last time.

Ask, Mr. Potter, ask whoever you can find, why Sirius Black did not go to Azkaban.

I remain, in shadows and starlight,

Starborn.

December 1st, 1993

Lucius:

By now, you will have heard about the attack on your son. You may not have known why we made it. You, of course, will be opening and closing your mouth in furious denial, thinking that you sent us the blood.

Yes, you did. And do you know one interesting thing about blood, Lucius? It can be used as a mirror.

We used it to read your intentions, Lucius. You have indeed been playing with us, pretending to commit to our cause while seeking a way out—or a way in with us, if you decided ours was the better path to survival. But you haven't been able to decide, have you? You have been kept hovering in the middle, foiled by the implacable dedication of those closest to you. Poor little Malfoy. Poor little Slytherin.

Poor, indeed, in everything but money. Look to those closest to you, Lucius. One of them is not quite so dedicated as you seem to think.

Understand: The attacks on your son and Harry Potter were both warnings. See how easily we can reach into the grounds? Well enough to slip a savage werewolf and a Dark magical artifact past the wards. We anticipated that the attack on Potter would fail, and that he would then return and save your son. It is the reason that we used a snake when we know that he is a Parselmouth. We do not wish to alienate you completely, only to play with you as you seem to so delight in playing with us.

But think of it, Lucius. One moment later on Potter's part, and your son would have died. Or Potter would have been a werewolf, or dead. He is only a child, Lucius. He can be destroyed as easily as any other child.

Do you understand us now? Do you see how serious we are? Do you see the advantages of committing to us?

Swallow your silly pride, Lucius, and bow your head. To some yokes even a Malfoy neck must yield, and you chose one of them when you took that brand upon your arm.

Send us a letter back within a week with your formal declaration of allegiance, or the next attack will come. And perhaps this one is the one we mean.

Chapter Twenty: Wrecks of a Dissolving Dream

"Hey, Harry."

Harry blinked and came slowly awake, putting a hand automatically to his scar. There was a faint trace of blood there—unsurprising, since he'd once again dreamed of the dark figures writhing in pain and the circle of shadows closing itself around him. He clenched his fingers carefully inward, making it seem as though he were wiping away sweat instead of blood, and then turned around with equal care. He had a crick in his neck from sleeping in the chair beside Draco's bed.

The first thing he checked on was that Draco was still asleep, his hand tucked beneath his cheek in a distinctly childlike gesture. Then he turned and looked at Connor. His brother seemed tentative, his eyes darting around in several directions before they settled on Harry's face.

"I, um," said Connor. He caught his breath, and caught his lip between his teeth as though in complement to it. "I went and talked with Sirius and Remus. They knew that you'd probably want to know why they didn't come and help when we heard the second werewolf howl."

Harry nodded tiredly. The dreams still lingered in his mind, wanting to poison it, but he forced himself to put aside the fear. He would worry about them later. He had to worry about his brother right now.

Connor shook his head. "Remus just went too far into wildness. He was having so much fun running that he didn't know what the werewolf's howl meant. And then Sirius was with him, and got caught up in the run, too, and didn't realize that I'd fallen so far behind, or into such danger." His eyes darted to Harry's and then away yet again. Harry supposed he didn't know how to feel. This was only the third time that Connor's life had been in such intense danger. Only Voldemort had ever threatened him so much before.

"That's all right," said Harry. "But I think they could watch out for you better next time, if they're going to take you with them again."

Connor nodded fervently. “Headmaster Dumbledore already made them promise to watch out for me.”

So Dumbledore is good for something after all, thought Harry, and stretched his arms above him, shaking his head slightly to convince his hair to lie flat, or as flat as it ever got. At least I can trust him to make provisions for Connor’s safety. “Thanks for telling me, Connor. I would have wondered.” He glanced again at Draco, and smiled when he saw that his eyelids were fluttering.

“Harry...”

Harry turned back to his brother. If Connor didn’t know how to deal with the danger, he thought, he must especially not have known how to deal with his brother saving his life. This time, Connor knew what had happened. The last time, Harry had Obliviated him.

He winced at the thought. I swore that I would give Remus back his memories. What can I do about Connor’s? Is there a way to heal his mind without making him hate me?

Connor drew in his breath, then let it all out in a rush and said, “Thank you for saving my life. I know that you’re good after all, no matter what Sirius says about Slytherins. Thank you.” He nearly hopped forward and gave Harry a quick, tight hug, leaning back almost before Harry could manage to return it.

But it was only almost, and Harry embraced his brother firmly. He could feel a weight he’d borne for so long as to hardly be conscious of it dropping from his shoulders. He had his brother’s good will back again. There was nothing half so important, not when he was being honest with himself.

“Harry?”

Harry turned, and met Draco’s eyes. Draco had flushed, and was scowling. Harry shook his head when he realized that Draco was probably jealous of Connor and the attention he was getting from Harry. It seemed that there was very little that Draco wouldn’t be

jealous of, and the more ridiculous, the better. Harry let Connor go, nevertheless, since it was obvious that his brother wanted to leave.

Connor slipped to the door of the hospital wing, and turned to smile back at Harry, pointedly avoiding Draco's eyes. "I'll see you at breakfast, Harry."

Harry nodded at him, and then turned and met Draco's gaze, raising his own eyebrows. "What?" he asked, when Draco's scowl didn't fade.

"You nearly died for him last night," said Draco. "And then he comes and treats you like that."

Harry blinked. "What do you mean? He brought me good news. He hugged me. That's hardly treating me poorly."

"He should have been groveling," said Draco. "I can't believe that he'll speak a few simple words, and you'll just accept him like that." He snapped his fingers, which was a gesture Harry had never seen him make. "You nearly died, Harry!"

"So did you," Harry pointed out, deciding to quash the line of thought Draco was building up as swiftly as he could. Draco wasn't Snape, and he would probably listen to the quashing. Harry was already regretting telling either of them about Greyback's attack. Connor probably wouldn't have said anything, and neither would Sirius and Remus or his pureblood allies. Harry had promised to be more honest, but when people were unreasonable in response to his revelations, could he be blamed for keeping them to himself?

Draco quieted at the reminder, dropping his eyes to his hands. "Yes," he said. "And I owe you another life debt, Harry."

"Oh, no, you don't," said Harry, remembering exactly what Draco had used his last life debt to make him do. "You wouldn't have been in danger if it weren't for me. I think someone was trying to hurt you to get at me. So I just saved the life that I put in danger."

"I can have a life debt to you if I want," said Draco, looking mutinous. Then he smiled. "Unless you refuse to accept it, of course," he said. "Or unless you're going to force me to withdraw it."

Harry ground his teeth. "Please, Draco," he said, "don't bind yourself in a life debt to me."

"Why not?" Draco tilted his head to the side and folded his arms. "I'm waiting for a good reason, you know. What you did with the snake last night was pretty fucking impressive."

"Because it embarrasses me," said Harry. "And I would really prefer not to have a debt that I might feel tempted to invoke just because you were being petty."

Draco snorted. "Harry, you're the last person I would think would abuse pureblood rituals for petty reasons."

"You've forgotten other things about me," said Harry, with a slight smile. "I might want you to stop annoying me about Connor, or leave me alone, and invoke the debt to make you leave me alone instead of maneuvering you so that you have so much homework you have to stop following me."

"You're too Slytherin for your own good," Draco muttered, and then flopped back in the bed. "I have to stay here," he added in a pathetic voice as Madam Pomfrey appeared. "I feel shaky, and I see the snake every time I close my eyes."

Madam Pomfrey clucked at once. "Of course you must, you poor dear," she said. "It's not every day that one of the students at Hogwarts almost dies." She waved her wand and cast a spell that Harry vaguely recognized as a ward which would tell her the physical and emotional state of her patient when she checked. "Just stay here. We'll make sure no Dark artifacts get you." She swept away.

Harry shook his head. "Who was saying something about being Slytherin?" he asked, and received a smug smile from Draco. He stood. "I have to get to breakfast."

"You could stay here with me," Draco suggested. His voice was soft and playful, but his gaze was intent. "I think Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let you leave if you told her what really happened last night. And I could use the company."

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, Draco, but I really do have to attend classes." He reached over and gripped the other boy's arm hard for a moment. Draco turned his hand upward so they were palm to palm. "Why don't you think about writing to your parents? They'll be frantic, I'm sure."

"I wish I could say the same about yours," Draco said, and then flopped down, his face mostly discontented.

Harry shrugged, and moved out of the hospital wing. He was already working on burying the memories of Greyback's attack. He wanted to make sure that he looked absolutely calm and composed when he met Snape and talked with him about these new restrictions his guardian had decided to impose.

I know that he'll be silly about some things now, and he'll take note of any weariness or weakness I display—even if that really comes from the dreams and not the attack.

Halfway to the dungeons, much to his annoyance, he had to detour to the loo and wash blood off his scar again. At least his head wasn't hurting.

"You are ready this time, I trust?" Snape's voice was casual, and he didn't look up from the essays he was marking.

Harry looked up from his own book and nodded, once. He saw no point in speaking. He thought his voice might shake in spite of all his preparation.

They'd received word three days ago that the Ministry intended to visit this weekend and check on Harry's "progress." The too-polite Ministry letter had revealed more than Amelia Bones perhaps intended it to, and Harry knew that Kingsley Shacklebolt had authority to ask more probing questions this time. He wondered idly if

Dumbledore had spoken to Madam Bones, or if she'd simply got impatient and nervous at the thought of someone in the press getting wind of the Aurors' non-progress in breaking the spell on his parents. There had been no more articles specifically about him since the first release of his magic, but Skeeter was always taking the opportunity to steer her other articles back towards him in some form or fashion.

Harry glanced once at the clock on the wall, and blinked. The Aurors should have been in Snape's private rooms twenty minutes ago. He bit his lip thoughtfully and went back to reading.

A sharp knock on the door a moment later made him nearly drop the book. Snape stood up and glanced at him. "As we prepared," he said.

Harry nodded. His breath was coming too fast, and he told himself to shut up and stop being ridiculous. He'd faced Fenrir Greyback. It was stupid to be nervous around Ministry Aurors who couldn't do anything to him.

Magically. But they could take away Snape's guardianship, and force you to live with Dumbledore or Sirius or your parents.

Harry didn't want that. His feelings were still a jumbled mess towards all of them. He was afraid that if he spent too much time with them right now, one of them would wind up severely injured or dead.

He stood and waited as calmly as he could while Snape opened the door to usher the Aurors in. Snape gave a single violent twitch of movement, though, and by that movement let Harry know something was wrong. He shook his sleeve and let his wand fall into his palm, while all around him his magic stirred and opened one eye.

But then Snape was stepping aside, as he certainly wouldn't have if the Aurors had come in with drawn wands or Dark Marks, and saying, "This is an unexpected honor. Welcome. I am Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts, Head of Slytherin House, and guardian of Harry Potter."

Harry frowned and craned his neck, since he couldn't yet see beyond Snape's head. Did they send someone new, that he feels the need to

introduce himself again? The letter only said that Shacklebolt and Feverfew would be coming.

They had indeed sent someone new, someone who strode into the room ahead of Shacklebolt and Feverfew as if he owned the place. Harry stared. This man was older, and walked with a slight limp that did absolutely nothing to diminish his air of ancient dignity—the mark of someone trained in pureblood ways almost from the time he could move. He wore glasses, like James, but his eyes were a startling yellow. He held his head up even as he nodded at Harry, as though it were impossible for him to really bend his neck.

“Mr. Potter,” he said, in a deep voice a little like a lion’s growl. “My name is Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office.”

Harry stared harder. He’d heard of Scrimgeour, of course—he’d studied his family along with the Malfoys and the Parkinsons and all the others who might someday be valuable as allies or important as enemies to Connor’s success. They had been among the proudest and most prestigious of the purebloods, always Sorting Slytherin, until Scrimgeour’s grandfather had taken it into his head to marry a Muggleborn Gryffindor witch, apparently because he wanted to. His halfblood father had become a Ravenclaw, and blown himself up in some mad Potions experiment while his son was still a baby. Then Rufus Scrimgeour had come to Hogwarts, Sorted Slytherin, and declared an intention to use no Dark magic, ever, when he was still twelve. He never had.

The Scrimgeours are a bloody confusing family, Harry had thought, the first time he finished studying them.

But—and this was the important thing at the moment—Rufus Scrimgeour had never been a friend of Dumbledore’s.

Why he was here, why he would have been allowed to come into an investigation controlled by an Order Auror, was beyond Harry’s comprehension.

Then he caught a glimpse of Shacklebolt’s furious face over Scrimgeour’s shoulder, and it clicked into place. Shacklebolt was still

under his superior's control, whoever he might serve in secret. If the Head of the Aurors wanted to invite himself along on this kind of investigation, Shacklebolt was hardly in a position to say no.

Harry smiled sincerely, something he hadn't thought he would do during the visit, and inclined his head. "Hello, sir. My name is Harry Potter, as I'm sure you know by now, and you've already met my guardian, Professor Snape."

Scrimgeour made a soft sound that might or might not have been a chuckle. His eyes hadn't left Harry's face. Harry wondered what he was seeing there. "I have indeed. Now. I understand that Auror Shacklebolt spoke with you last time?" Harry nodded. "Then I think he should speak with your guardian this time, and I will interview you. Alone," he added, as though he had felt Feverfew's movement to come along with him. Feverfew sagged. Harry thought that was due less to a desire to listen in—he still didn't know if Feverfew was part of the Order—than to a desire to avoid being left with Snape.

"I think that is an excellent idea," said Snape smoothly. "I trust that you will not ask my ward any questions that are out of line, Scrimgeour?"

The older wizard turned and faced Snape fully, making it look as though his limp were a natural part of his gait and not an infirmity at all. He didn't look upset by his lack of a title, either. "No," he said. "Of course not. What kind of Auror does that?" Then he turned back, met Harry's eyes again, and nodded towards the back of the room, near Snape's bookshelves.

Harry went along with a will. He was already wild with curiosity. Scrimgeour might have come along just to spite Dumbledore, but that would mean he had to already know something about the investigation and the unusual nature of it. Harry highly doubted that the Head of the Auror Office just strolled out constantly and left the Ministry on a whim.

Scrimgeour leaned against the wall and watched Harry. Harry watched him back. He realized he had no idea what would happen next, and was rather happy about that. At least he knew he was

fencing with an opponent who wasn't interested in putting a phoenix web on him.

"Now," said Scrimgeour, who seemed fond of that word. "I would like the answers to a few honest questions."

Harry raised his brows, let a small smile play around his lips, and nodded.

"Why did you choose Professor Snape to adopt you?" Scrimgeour's lips flickered for a moment, in an expression so quick that Harry couldn't have said whether it was smile or sneer, and his eyes took an equally quick tour of the room. "I can feel Dark magic everywhere in here."

Harry nodded again. Scrimgeour had hunted down Dark wizards for a living for over thirty years. That he had a sensitivity to that kind of magic didn't surprise Harry. "I chose him because I trusted him," he said. He paused, then decided that, trained in pureblood ways though this man obviously was, he didn't seem inclined to perform the dances, and Harry had no reason to do so with him. "And because I thought he could protect me from Dumbledore's interference."

Scrimgeour's gaze was absolutely locked on him now. Harry saw him note everything about what Harry had said, including the lack of a title for Dumbledore, and then he smiled. Harry blinked. That was a full, open, dazzling smile, one that transformed the man's whole face into something approachable.

"Yes, well, Dumbledore should have known that his tame Dark wizard could be used against him sooner or later," Scrimgeour murmured. "And why do you trust Snape more than your godfather?"

Harry hesitated for a long moment. He had to step carefully. He had little compunction about maneuvering Dumbledore into a trap; Shacklebolt's involvement here just proved that Dumbledore was still trying to trap him. But he had no right to reveal Sirius's past.

"I don't trust him," he settled for saying at last.

Scrimgeour grinned at him, a fierce expression. “I see,” he said. “And would that have anything to do with the rather large Dark legacy that the Black family represents?”

Harry blinked again. Scrimgeour was offering him a way out of being forced to stay with Sirius—a way based on a claim that Scrimgeour would know was false, but which everyone else would surely believe, since they knew how dim a view the Head of the Aurors took of Dark wizards. Of course, some people would say he was being unreasonable, but that was all right. Scrimgeour had far more room to legally obstruct matters than Harry did. Let him in to mess with things, and the Ministry’s quick investigation would turn grindingly slow.

“Why?” Harry whispered.

Scrimgeour’s eyes went to the far side of the room, where Snape was being scathingly polite at Shacklebolt. “One more piece of information from you,” he said. “I’ve thought for a long time that Shacklebolt seemed more than usually attached to Hogwarts. Is that true?”

Obviously, being devoted to the Light doesn’t prevent him from having a brain. Harry nodded.

Scrimgeour exhaled and gave that feral grin again. “I knew it,” he said, and then focused on Harry. “I don’t know how much you know about Lords,” he said.

“Quite a bit,” said Harry, thinking of Starborn’s letter.

Scrimgeour nodded. “Dumbledore’s a Light Lord. You-Know-Who is a Dark Lord. I don’t like ‘em. Neither of ‘em.” Harry recognized his suddenly informal diction as an affectation, but had to admit it was effective. “That’s why I work for the Ministry. The Ministry’s inefficient and simple-minded and petty and choose whatever other adjective you like, but it’s a normal place. It gives normal wizards a chance to change things, since we don’t all have the power of a Lord. On a normal day, we balance ‘em. I don’t like Lords mucking about with my Ministry. Dumbledore is doing that right now.” He stared straight into Harry’s eyes. “Now, maybe you’re going to become a Lord, and if you are, then I’ll fight you as hard as I’ve fought all the rest of ‘em. But

until you do, then you're someone else Dumbledore's trying to control, and, moreover, someone who could fight him a hell of a lot more effectively than other people could, if you can just get rid of some of the barriers in your way. I'll do my part with the legal barriers. You can repay me by not becoming a bloody Lord and ordering people about the way the rest of 'em do."

Harry felt his heart lift in wonder. Scrimgeour was confusing and contradictory, a Light-devoted Slytherin, a pureblood who talked like a Muggleborn, and it seemed he liked having the freedom to be that way. Harry was inclined to respect someone like that. He nodded. "I can do that."

"So you don't trust Sirius Black because he's a Dark wizard," said Scrimgeour, looking keenly interested. "And what about your parents? That was Dark magic cast on them. I knew it the moment I saw them."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Scrimgeour stared right through him. He knew, he had to know, that Harry was the one who'd cast the Fugitivus Animus spell on his parents.

"It is Dark magic," said Harry, treading carefully. "I—I don't want to go back to them yet."

Scrimgeour tilted his head at him. "Scared?"

"Of myself," said Harry honestly.

The Auror nodded sharply. "Of course," he said, a little louder. "You're only a child, after all, for all your power. Of course a thirteen-year-old wizard would be scared of a household where Dark magic had been used."

Harry couldn't help smiling.

"Most natural thing in the world," Scrimgeour went on blandly. "I can see that you'll want to stay here because at least here you know where the Dark magic is coming from, and of course you wouldn't try to learn it yourself because of that fear, oh no. And of course you

trust your Head of House. It might be a grim home, but you know what to expect from it. And isn't that the greatest need of growing children, after all? Stability, and security, and peace?"

Harry thought he would have given a good deal to be in the room when Scrimgeour made the same arguments, in a tone of absolute and utter calm, to Amelia Bones and the rest of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He definitely sounded as though he believed himself, and if anyone could shake him out of his mask of calm reason, Harry didn't know who it would be.

"I know I need a lot of stability, and security, and peace," he managed to say, keeping his tone woeful.

"I know that you do."

Harry squirmed. Scrimgeour was looking at him again, and seeing far too much. Lucky that the man would be leaving in a little while, he thought fervently.

After that keen glance, Scrimgeour nodded and stepped away from him. "I've seen all that I need to see here," he announced imperiously. "Shacklebolt, Feverfew. Let's go. I'm quite satisfied that the boy's proper place is with the guardian he's chosen."

Shacklebolt paled. "But, sir—"

"Not now," said Scrimgeour. "The stench of Dark magic here is making me sick." He strolled to the door. "We'll talk everything over on the way back to the Ministry, won't we, Kingsley?"

Feverfew practically scurried out the door. Shacklebolt lingered a moment, and glared at Harry and Snape both.

"This isn't the end of things," he breathed.

"Of course it isn't," said Scrimgeour from right behind him, making Shacklebolt jump a foot in the air. "Come along, Kingsley. There's still paperwork to file." He made it sound as if he would look forward to it.

Harry felt a horrible kind of admiration rise up in him. Damn, he's good.

Shacklebolt trailed out, looking embarrassed and frustrated and furious beyond measure. Scrimgeour casually shut the door behind them.

Harry burst out laughing the moment he was sure the Aurors were far enough down the hall not to hear him. Snape's face wore a smirk as he settled into his chair and pulled the pile of essays towards him again.

"That was...interesting," he said.

Harry flung himself down on the couch next to his book and grinned at him. "Why do we have allies in the Ministry, of all places?"

"It is not we," said Snape, peering at him. "It's you."

Harry blinked, then picked up his book. People seemed to make a habit of disconcerting him today.

Lucius Malfoy was having a nervous breakdown.

It was the only way he could identify his present behavior to himself. His gaze darted back and forth continually between the last letter he'd received from those demanding he declare allegiance to Lord Voldemort, and Hogwarts. He currently stood in the outer edges of the Forbidden Forest, not far from that disgusting half-giant's hut, his hands white where they clutched the letter.

He knew he had no choice but to pursue the path he'd come here to take. That didn't mean he had to like it.

Lucius tried to straighten his shoulders and put his Malfoy mask back on. It didn't work. It hadn't worked from the moment that he received the first letter threatening Draco's life, and all the ones that had followed, whispering secrets that no one could have known about Draco unless they were inside Hogwarts.

He had thought of showing the letters to Narcissa, but he knew that she would not have understood the complications of the situation. She was blindly besotted with Harry Potter, certain the boy was going to save them all. She would have given him a single hard look and told him to join Potter's side of the war. She already trusted Potter beyond all reason simply for saving Draco's life—the way he'd been meant to do, apparently.

Besides, tell Narcissa that her son was in danger, and she was bound to do something blind and stupid.

And...

Lucius stared at the letter in his hand again. Two lines leaped out at him, just as they had in his first hurried scan of it.

And do you know one interesting thing about blood, Lucius? It can be used as a mirror.

Lucius knew of no spell that could do that, and he was sure that he was experienced enough in Dark magic that he would have heard of one. Quite obviously, the people threatening his son had access to Dark magical artifacts (as if their attack on Draco with the snake hadn't proven that!) And Lucius had no idea what they were, nor what they might be used for next.

That also meant they might be watching him right now, but since he had no idea if they were or how to tell if the Dark artifact was focused on him, he had to act as if he had a chance at success.

Look to those closest to you, Lucius. One of them is not quite so dedicated as you seem to think.

That was the other reason he'd chosen not to show the letter to Narcissa. The letter writer was most likely lying, trying to encourage Lucius to distrust his wife, but just in case...just in case...

Lucius lifted his gaze back to the castle and shook his head. He had sent the letter declaring allegiance to the Dark Lord's cause because he had no choice, and that meant that the best time to move was now,

while the Dark Lord's followers thought he was one of them. He would take Draco from Hogwarts, so that no one could threaten him again. He would send him to Durmstrang. The Malfoys had powerful friends there, wizards who would protect Draco and teach him Dark magic, and who would not care about the Dark Lord until he had actually returned and was threatening them. And Lucius would not tell Narcissa until the matter had actually been accomplished.

She was the one who wanted Draco to go to Hogwarts, Lucius remembered. Could she have known, even then...?

Then he shook that thought off, because some suspicions were too paranoid even for him, cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, and moved forward. No one looked towards him, even though several students were flying above the Quidditch Pitch. Lucius curled his lip. Inefficient. If I were Headmaster of the school, I would have wards that would detect such Charms in operation.

He made it inside Hogwarts without anyone noticing, waited a moment to make sure he did not track muddy footprints across the floor, and then moved slowly towards the Slytherin dungeons. Even from here, he could feel a hollow echo, beating in his head like a drum, that signaled a coming headache.

That would be Harry Potter, then.

Lucius had no doubt the brat was powerful; he had felt as much himself when Potter was at the Manor for the summer. Lucius also had no doubt that the brat was incapable of defeating the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord had studied for decades, and had experience as well as magic behind him that Harry Potter could not match. Raw, untamed strength was no use against the Dark Lord's knowledgeable cruelty.

That was the thing Narcissa had not understood, though Lucius had tried to argue the issue with her in abstract terms. She had insisted that Harry Potter would be able to protect them, that Lucius simply did not understand the strength of his magic. Of course, she also insisted that Draco was utterly devoted to the boy—another thing Lucius had been able to see for himself that summer—and that she wanted them

to remain Potter's allies for Draco's sake more than for any other reason.

Lucius sneered. She does not appear to have considered the possibility that it is Potter's magic that calls to Draco, and makes him so unlike a Malfoy, by taking part of his personality away.

Lucius knew the symptoms, and knew that when Draco was removed from Potter's presence for a long enough period of time, he would recover. That was another reason to free his son from Potter, so that Draco could make an actual choice that he never could with that kind of magic overpowering him.

And, of course, there was the fact that Malfoy pride would not allow Lucius to bend his neck fully to anyone but a Lord. This child was not a Lord. He was only a child, one who had somehow swayed both Lucius's son and his wife.

Lucius knew he would have a fight on his hands after he removed Draco from Hogwarts, but he expected his son to see sense. Narcissa would take a little more effort. But they would have to draw together in the face of whatever attacks Lucius would face from the enraged letter writers. Narcissa would choose family loyalty over whatever fussy principles she had. She always did.

Lucius smiled as he stopped at the door to the Slytherin common room and waited for a student to exit so he could slip inside. It was perfect, really. Once his son was out of danger, then his mind would stop clouding with panic, and he could face his enemies with the fury that waited, boiling, behind the panic.

The wall slid open. Lucius prepared to step inside, and then stopped, staring, as Harry Potter stepped out of the opening—

And looked straight at him, magic welling around him like ripples in a pond, like painful drums, like wings.

"Mr. Malfoy," said Potter calmly, "I don't know what you're doing here, but you'll have to go through me if you want to harm Draco."

Chapter Twenty-One: Pomona and Septimus Renewed

Harry could feel Lucius's tension, and his shock. It boiled off him like warm air. Harry watched his face, and saw the slight shudders there, the way that Lucius's eyes wanted to dart off to the side and the way he controlled them and refused to let them do so. Something had come close to splintering the man's mask, probably the near-death of his only child.

Or perhaps not, Harry thought, remembering the dream that had awoken him and driven him out of the Slytherin common room. A dark shadow had stalked towards Draco, who lay peacefully sleeping in his bed, unaware of it. Harry had only come out into the corridor for a breath of fresh air at first, but then he'd seen Lucius standing there, and his dream made much more sense than they usually did.

Lucius finally drew himself together enough to respond. He lifted his chin. "You are not the arbiter of how I should raise my son, Mr. Potter," he said, voice gone cold enough that Harry would not have been surprised to see ice frosting the stones. "We are currently in truce-dance, and I would prefer not to have to hurt you. Stand aside. I am invoking the Officium Auctoris. There is nothing you can do to prevent me from taking my son from the school."

Harry blinked. The Officium Auctoris referred to the eldest living member of a pureblood family's right to decide what was best for the other members. Harry hadn't read of an invocation of it in the last fifty years, since it was generally considered bad form to intervene too drastically in another wizard's life, and a sign of having failed in the dances, that one needed to resort to such a crass weapon. That Lucius would reach for it now was surprising...

And out of character. Harry narrowed his eyes and waited, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Stand aside, Mr. Potter," said Lucius, his voice grown even colder. "You know that you have no authority in this matter."

"I am waiting," said Harry.

Lucius simply narrowed his own eyes further. He didn't need to sneer, like Snape did, Harry thought. He conveyed his authority with his whole body, shoulders and hands and feet at least as much as his face.

Save that he was showing more fear than glacial command now, and Harry found himself glad of it. Frightened people did stupid things, and Lucius having done a stupid thing was the only hope Harry could count on that he wouldn't be forced to yield to him.

"Waiting, Mr. Potter?" Lucius asked, when Harry had made it clear he wasn't moving anywhere.

"For the salt and the smoke and the silver," said Harry, and waited again.

Lucius hissed between his teeth. "I do not need—"

"Yes, actually, you do," said Harry peaceably. "Not if you simply wished to invoke your right to control Draco's life, no. But when you invoke it in the middle of a truce-dance, you need the salt and the smoke and the silver to create a space into which I cannot enter." He clasped his hands together more firmly as he saw the storm building on Lucius's face, and called his magic to rise around him. "My truce is with your whole family, Mr. Malfoy, not merely yourself. If you try to take Draco away without the proper rituals, then I might simply assume that you're an impostor and attack you. And I would be within my rights—in fact, within my duties, in defending a member of your family from an improper Officium Auctoris. A true Malfoy surely would not have forgotten such details. Shall I check you for Polyjuice?" Harry kept to the tone of courtesy, certain that he would win this dance.

And he did. Lucius broke, his eyes blazing with true fury.

"You are impudent, boy," he whispered. "Stand aside, now."

Harry shook his head. "You have no authority to command me to stand aside. We are equals at this point in the truce-dance."

Lucius reached for his wand. Harry lifted all the controls on his magic. Lucius promptly slumped back, gasping, and the slightly glazed look that Harry had expected came into his eyes. Starborn had said his magic called to purebloods. Harry had not imagined the results would be so dramatic.

"Harry? What are you doing?"

Harry looked over his shoulder. Draco had slipped out of the Slytherin common room, too, and his eyes were blinking in sleepy confusion, while one hand rose to rub at his face. Then he saw Lucius, and felt the magic in the air, and frowned.

"Father, you didn't," he said.

Harry lowered his magic a little, tucking more of it behind barriers. He hadn't meant to send Lucius into quite this state of...shock, awe, wonder, whatever it was. Luckily, it seemed that Lucius could recover from it quickly. He straightened and gave his head a little shake, and then was burning and clear-eyed again.

"I will not be scolded by my own son, Draco," he said. He's still shaken, a bit, Harry thought, watching him. He would have been able to command Draco's obedience with no more than a look if things were as normal.

And Draco would certainly have obeyed. Instead, he folded his arms and launched into a lecture.

"Has it occurred to you that I'm capable of making up my own mind about my friends, Father?" he asked. "You raised me with the capacity to judge power for myself, and not only in the name of survival. I was supposed to be true to the Malfoy name." His eyes were lit with an emotion that Harry had seen only once before—last year, when Draco had out-danced his father. "And I think I have been. You, on the other hand, have an unfortunate habit of forsaking our honor and leaving it for me and Harry Potter to guard. And now it is happening again." He narrowed his eyes. "Our honor is rather lonely, Father."

Lucius's fury had gone bone-deep now. Harry tensed as he took a step forward. Perhaps this was what the dream meant. He certainly looks ready to hex Draco now.

"I told you," said Lucius, his voice quieter than Snape's had ever been, "I will not be scolded by my own son. I have come to remove you to Durmstrang, Draco. You will be happier there."

"Safer, you mean to say," Draco murmured, and then laughed, a sound so full of choking bitterness that Harry looked at him askance and wondered what he had missed. "Isn't it obvious that I'm safer here, Father? You've felt Harry's magic. You know that he would kill to protect me. He saved my life from the snake." Draco's cheeks were flushed now, his eyes glittering in a match for his father's. "And now you tell me that that's not good enough, that I'll be safer at bloody Durmstrang, in the midst of Dark wizards? That's doubting Harry's ability as well as my judgment. How many more insults will you pile up, Father? Don't you care at all about soothing matters over with powerful wizards? Or is that always going to be my bloody job?"

"Draco," said a mild voice from behind Lucius. "Language."

Draco immediately stood straighter, and the flush disappeared from his cheeks as he inclined his head. "My apologies, Mother."

Harry blinked as Narcissa Malfoy walked around her husband and came over to stand next to him and Draco. Lucius was staring at her in shock equal to what he'd shown on feeling Harry's power. Narcissa gave her son a gentle look and a murmur of, "I shall expect you to guard your tongue better in the future."

Then she turned and gave her husband a glare that made Harry want to duck.

"Did you think I wouldn't follow you out of the house, Lucius?" she asked softly. "If you really distrust me, you should have unhooked me from the Manor's wards. That would not have let me feel you leave."

"What are you talking about, Mother?" Draco asked. "Why would he distrust you?" He shot his father an accusatory glance, which Lucius seemed to be doing his best to ignore.

Harry took a short step backwards. Obviously, this was much more a private family affair than he had realized, and he was sure that Narcissa could take care of her son. He should probably—

Narcissa's gaze darted to him, and she shook her head slightly, even as she answered Draco. Harry blinked and stood still.

"Your father has been receiving letters," said Narcissa, and Lucius's face paled further. "They are from someone threatening to resurrect the Dark Lord, and threatening your life in order to make your father cooperate. Your father has gone along with them so far, as I believe he could not see a way out of it. But today he came to the school, and intended, it seems, to abduct you from Hogwarts and take you to Durmstrang." Narcissa paused for a moment, and then fixed her eyes on Lucius and said, "You are an idiot, husband."

Lucius finally seemed to have recovered from the triple shock of his son's defiance, his wife's appearance, and his wife's knowledge. He straightened and moved a hand to his sleeve, as though he would draw his wand. Narcissa rolled her eyes and made a very slight movement with one wrist.

Lucius's wand tore itself from his grasp and sailed to her. Narcissa tucked it away among her robes, and then took a step forward. Harry didn't think it was coincidence that her body shielded both him and Draco from any attack by Lucius.

"Did it ever occur to you," said Narcissa, in the kind of voice she might use to ask what a fine day it was, "that I might be able to help you? That I might be able to understand the intricacies of the situation better than you know, because I have been in almost constant contact with Draco? That I would have understood the threat if you showed me those letters, but I would have been able to think of some way to deal with it?"

Lucius was breathing harshly, his pale cheeks flushed with spots of color. Harry supposed he thought there was no harm in showing emotion now, since his mask had been not just ripped off but stomped on.

“No,” said Narcissa. “I can see that you did not think that. Why?”

“You would have reacted blindly if your son was in danger, Narcissa,” said Lucius, finding his voice at last. He stood and leveled Narcissa with a glare that actually made Harry feel a bit better. He could think under stress, then. Harry would have felt slightly unnerved to find a Malfoy so broken and beaten back that he couldn’t. “Stupidly.”

“As you have done?” Narcissa asked.

Lucius opened his mouth, and ended up sealing it again. His gaze went to Harry. Harry returned the gaze calmly. It was Lucius’s decision as to what to do. Perhaps his dream wasn’t right, and Lucius wasn’t a threat. If he moved to be one, Harry would stand ready.

He felt Draco’s steady pressure against his right shoulder. Without looking at him, Harry draped an arm around the other boy, and felt Draco relax against him.

Lucius’s eyes narrowed, as if that sign of trust and affection had been the banner he was looking for, and he turned back to Narcissa. “He is a child,” he said, his voice burning with cold. “You have already seen what our enemies are capable of, Narcissa—hiding in Hogwarts and sending a Dark magical snake to threaten our son, a snake that could have killed him.”

Narcissa nodded slowly. “And that shows what our enemies are capable of,” she said. “What escapes me is how you have missed what our allies are capable of, Lucius. Harry saved Draco’s life.”

“He was meant to!” Lucius flourished a piece of parchment at her. Narcissa took it from him and read it. If the contents affected her at all, Harry couldn’t tell. Narcissa looked up at the end of it and met her husband’s eyes.

"And it never occurred to you that they were lying, to try and save face after their plans failed?" she asked. "That they had underestimated Harry, and didn't want you to know it? I read one of the early letters, Lucius, that mentioned something about Harry not being very powerful. That is obviously not true. Why would you trust them at all?" She folded the letter into four neat squares and held it out to him.

Harry could see Lucius making a mighty attempt to recover himself. It was like trying to steer a plunging Pegasus with only one rein, though. He shook his head, and his temper won out again as he snatched the letter back from Narcissa.

"It is different for you than it is for me," he said. "You know why." He made the smallest of motions towards his left arm.

Narcissa snorted. "Oh, yes. Because you wear an ugly brand, you should let the brand dominate your life and become more important than your family. Very winning behavior, Lucius. You did not let it become more important twelve years ago; why should it do so now?"

"Narcissa," said Lucius in a snarl, his eyes darting to Harry.

"Don't worry, Mr. Malfoy," said Harry calmly. "I've known since my Christmas with you that you were Marked, and that Mrs. Malfoy wasn't." He paused for a moment, wondering if he should say what he was thinking, and then shrugged and gave in. It was best that Lucius know exactly where he had stood. This was a matter too severe for the indirect dances. "And I'm going to make sure that Draco is never Marked."

He heard a hiss from beside him, but he wasn't sure what expression was on Draco's face: surprise, or gratitude, or hope. His gaze was fixed on Lucius's face, and the emotions there. There were too many to see all at once, a storm of them. He wondered how many months Lucius had labored under his lonely pressure, the stress of the letters mounting. He wondered more why the man had never thought to trust his wife, but that was over and done with. What was important at the moment was what was in front of him.

"Thank you, Harry," said Narcissa, her voice warm. "And I will add my voice to yours." She turned and faced Lucius. "You should know, Lucius," she said, casually, "that Draco will never be Marked as long as I live, either."

Lucius flung his head up. He looked like a stag backed against a cliff by a pack of wolves, Harry thought in sympathy. Of course, matters would have been much easier if he had just thought to ask someone before now whether it would be a good idea to trust Harry Potter or the Dark Lord's servants.

"You have chosen your side, then." Lucius carefully enunciated his words, his eyes looking only at Narcissa this time. He had gained that much control of himself, then. "I did not think it would be so soon. There are still reasons to follow the Dark Lord, Narcissa. You know them as well as I do."

"I do," said Narcissa. "And were it not for certain things that have happened this year, then I would even agree with you that we should consider those reasons. But those things happened." She turned and looked directly at Harry this time, not seeming nervous that her husband would strike at her back. "Harry," she said. "I felt your power. I have heard from Draco that you never intend to become a Lord. That is true, isn't it?"

Harry nodded.

Narcissa nodded back. "Then I am your ally," she said.

"That is impossible," Lucius snarled from behind his wife. "Anyone who has the kind of power the boy does must become a Lord, but he is not that yet, and will not be for many years. He would die if he faced the Dark Lord."

"He has faced the Dark Lord twice, Lucius," said Narcissa softly. "Once at the end of first year, and once in the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry blinked at her. "How do you know about that?" If she knew that he and not Connor had banished Tom Riddle...

Narcissa gestured to Draco. "I listen to my son."

Harry relaxed. If Narcissa got the story from Draco, she would have heard only the carefully modified versions that he told most people, and in both of those, Connor was the hero of the story.

"He would still die if he faced the Dark Lord in full power," Lucius interjected stubbornly. "And that is what will happen." He paused for a moment, as though trying to recover some of the coolness he had lost, and then plunged ahead. "You know this, Narcissa, since you have read the letters. This group may be small, but it is determined. They will resurrect the Dark Lord in the end, and then how will you face him, Potter?" He was all but snarling at Harry. Harry remembered the expression from when Lucius had faced his parents in Diagon Alley last year. "Not the pitiful remnants of him that may have been in that diary, but the real thing?"

"The same way I have so far, sir," said Harry quietly. "With my brother, who defeated him once before—and as a far younger child than I am." He had decided it was no use disputing Lucius's classification of him and asking the man to call him an adult. He would simply adopt it, adapt it, and use it as necessary.

"You think that." Lucius sneered. "I think it far more likely that you would die, and your allies with you."

"That's funny, Father," said Draco, all perfect, bright brittleness. "I didn't think you were so eager to see me die."

Even Harry winced at the look on Lucius's face when Draco said that. Lucius drew in a thick breath, as though shards of something were caught in his throat. Then he knelt and held out a hand. "Draco," he said. "Look at me."

Draco stirred at Harry's side, but from the motion, he'd simply pressed his face into Harry's shoulder.

"I came here to save you," said Lucius softly. His extended hand trembled. His voice did not. Harry had some idea of what that

mastery cost him, and was properly impressed. “I promise, Draco. I would never leave you here to die. I was going to keep you out of the battleground that Hogwarts will become. You will go to Durmstrang, and be safe there. I promise it.”

“No,” said Draco softly. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay with Harry.”

“I am your father, Draco,” said Lucius. “You will go if I say you will.” Already, Harry could see, he was trying to force himself past that moment of vulnerability. His face was tightening, turning sharp and chill.

“Then I have no part in my son’s fate?” Narcissa asked. The very softness of her voice was a danger signal. Harry backed up a step, pulling Draco with him.

“Stop this, Narcissa.” Lucius tried to sound commanding. It didn’t work. “I am making the only possible decision for all of us. We will not die. We will stand on the winning side—“

“With all due respect, Mr. Malfoy,” Harry asked, “how is that possible if pulling Draco out of Hogwarts isn’t what these enemies want you to do?”

Lucius narrowed his eyes at him. “The Dark Lord will return,” he said. “I have no doubt of it. I merely intend not to see him return this way.”

Harry made a sound of surprise that turned into a chuckle halfway through, and rather choked him. Lucius went on glaring. Harry got himself under control and glanced at Draco, whose eyes were shining with perfect agreement. “Do you want to tell him,” Harry asked, “or should I?”

“Oh, you,” Draco urged him. “I don’t think he would take it as well coming from his own son. You’ve already seen how my insults devastate him.”

Lucius growled. Harry nodded to his best friend and turned back towards that best friend’s father, determined to keep his smile small and his voice as diplomatic as possible.

"Mr. Malfoy," he said gently, "you've already chosen your side. I know what the Dark Lord was like in the last years of his reign, and I've faced him twice, as your wife told you. Do you really think that he would forgive treachery against an attempt to bring him back?"

Lucius went still. His extended hand stopped trembling, and his eyes went on staring with no sign of the emotions under the surface. But Harry knew what the stillness was a sign of, and pushed forward.

"You stand with us," he said. "Your concern for Draco shows that. I can't believe that you would really hurt him to get him to leave Hogwarts. That's why you came in and tried to abduct him in the first place, instead of use a coercive spell to bring him home. I can't allow you to do harm to his free will, either, of course. But perhaps I didn't need to worry about that. I think you always knew what side you were on. You just needed an announcement to make you see it."

Lucius was utterly still for a moment longer. Then he began to breathe wildly. Harry shifted, ready to step in front of Draco if he needed shelter from a sudden burst of magic.

"You dare accuse me of doing harm to my son's free will?" Lucius whispered. "You dare?"

Harry frowned, wondering why that statement out of all of them was the one Lucius had taken exception to. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy," he said slowly. "I saw a shadow in my dreams just before you arrived. The shadow was threatening Draco. I don't think now that you would physically hurt him, but you did intend to take him away from Hogwarts when it wasn't his choice to go."

"And what do you think you have done to him?" Lucius asked in a steadily rising voice, as he stood.

"Father, no, don't," Draco said abruptly. His voice was small, and desperate, and went utterly ignored.

Harry clenched his fists. "What have I done to him?" His own voice sounded like a distant gong in his ears, competing with his heartbeat.

"You've changed him," said Lucius flatly. "My son is not the same now as when he went to Hogwarts, and the change happened immediately after he met you. Your magic is too strong, Potter. You will wind up a Lord, whether you want to or not. You have already compelled Draco into changing into someone else, something else, merely to fulfill your desires to have a pet."

"No," Harry whispered.

But he turned and met Draco's eyes, and saw them widen, and knew there was at least some truth in what Lucius had said. And his mind leaped then, and made the connection with the last time Draco's voice had sounded that desperate.

When Hermione nearly told me...

"My magic doesn't just attract other wizards," he whispered. "It compels them. And I didn't know."

"Is not knowing an excuse for doing it?" Lucius pounced on his words like a wolf. "It has happened, Mr. Potter. My son is not the same person as he was. I would wager that many people near you are not the same people they would have been without your interference, your influence." He laughed sharply. "At least the Dark Lord was honest about who he was, and what he wanted. He wanted to change our world. You have altered and twisted and broken minds for no reason other than a mere child's desires to be safe or comfortable or have friends."

"Lucius," said Narcissa, her voice deadly.

Harry didn't hear what happened next. His world was falling around him, the careful justifications he'd built to keep from panicking since the release of his magic. He had compelled people. All his fulminations against Dumbledore had been for nothing. How could he be angry at the Headmaster for binding him, when he had bound others? Not wanting to do it was not the same thing as not doing it. He had thought he had some time before he began to possibly compel people with the force of his magic alone, but it seemed he did

not. His magic had done that even when itself compelled to obedience by the phoenix web. What was going to happen now that it was free?

He swept his magic around him, wrapping it as close as he could, and then put it to a good use for once, sending himself to a place where compulsion was practiced all the time, and so where he would feel most at home.

He felt Hogwarts' wards against Apparition trying frantically to resist him, but Harry smashed straight through them, his body bending, his mind twisting, and then the room vanishing behind him.

Lucius had only a moment to enjoy his victory before Narcissa's palm connected with his face.

She had chosen the slap carefully, he knew, and had hit him in such a way that the handprint would be highly visible, and red. He had heard the wandless spell she hissed under her breath, and knew the handprint would not fade. Lucius took a stumbling step backwards and touched the handprint. He felt numb. In all the years of their marriage, Narcissa had never hit him this way. It was how a Dark witch marked her husband for doing something savagely, unforgivably stupid. He would wear the marking until she chose to take it off.

Narcissa stepped away from him, eyes wide and brilliant and still. Draco was shattered, staring at the spot where Potter had been, his hands clenched in front of him. His wife moved so that she entirely shielded their son from Lucius's sight. Those brilliant eyes fixed on him.

"I informed Draco about the possibility of his being compelled by Harry's magic months ago," she said, enunciating every word. "He took appropriate steps, and in the end decided that he was free enough to continue being Harry's friend. But he waited to tell Harry until he could find the words. And now you have undone that, Lucius, and possibly overset the fragile mind of a very powerful and very unstable young wizard." She paused, and the silence burned. "Congratulations," she said at last.

Lucius said nothing. He didn't lower his eyes from his wife's, but he didn't say anything, either. He was feeling the backwash of the magic that Potter had used to vanish now, lapping waves of pain and power.

The boy was stronger than any wizard he had ever felt, even the Dark Lord the night before he had gone to destroy the Potter twins. Lucius felt as though he were bathed in roaring black surf. Every part of his body tingled and began to ache the way that usually only his head did when he faced another wizard's unleashed magic.

Lucius began to glimpse, dimly, then, what he had done.

Footsteps sounded down the corridor, and Severus rounded it at a dead run, his wand drawn. He paused when he saw all three Malfoys, but his eyes swept past the two adults and found Draco. "Where is Harry?" he asked bluntly.

"He Apparated," Draco whispered. "Father upset him."

Severus turned and gave Lucius a look that reminded him of the one he had received last year, when Severus had been carrying Potter to the school in his arms. Lucius lifted his head and met the glare. They weren't Death Eaters anymore. There was nothing Severus could do to him.

Then he remembered some half-read rumor in the paper, that Severus had adopted the boy, or chosen to play legal guardian to him for his own obscure reasons.

Severus would have every right to hurt him for hurting the Potter boy.

Lucius felt his head began to ache more fiercely.

"I am not going to kill you," said Severus. "Harry would not like it. I will leave you to contemplate your own stupidity, Lucius, and to explain to the Headmaster what that blast of magic was, when he comes looking. I am going to search for Harry." He turned on his heel and strode away, his robes snapping around him. Draco wriggled out from behind Narcissa and ran after him.

That left Lucius alone with his wife. Narcissa did not move as she stood there, and her eyes never wavered.

"You do not deserve a second chance, Lucius," she said at last, her voice cold and pitiless. "You should have consulted with me the moment the letters began arriving, the moment you noticed that Draco was drawn to Harry by the strength of his magic. You have interfered in your son's friendship and broken my word. I promised that no one would hurt Harry or Draco, as long as Draco was sure that this friendship came about of his own free will."

"You do not deserve it, all things considered," she went on thoughtfully, after a pause, "but you will be given it, because you are Draco's father, and my husband, and, as Harry pointed out, his ally by your own actions." She extended a hand.

Lucius stared at her palm. Dare he clasp it? He had been humiliated as never before today, and normally he would have been imagining the vengeance he would take on the ones who had done it. Now, however, there was only the thick, cold taste of shame in his throat.

"For once, Lucius," said Narcissa, her voice forceful and serene, "bend your proud neck. I can help you, but only if you let me."

Lucius reached up and clasped her hand.

Harry sat on the bed in the Shrieking Shack and stared at the far wall, while his mind whirled and cut and danced around thoughts that he had never believed he would think.

He could remember, now, the way that Draco had altered his behavior in first year. He had gone from cool and assured on the Express, and even the first few nights after Harry was Sorted into Slytherin, to a devoted friend. And why? He'd had no choice. Even then, Harry had leaned on his mind, woven his own web, used his magic to force out the kinds of reactions he'd wanted from Draco.

And Snape in the first year? Snape was an Occlumens. Harry was sure he could feel the intrusions of the magic on his thoughts and

deal with them. That would certainly account for his volatile attitude. But he had mellowed since then, as he became more used to Harry.

Or the magic mellowed him for me.

Harry swallowed a moan. He'd wanted someone to trust, hadn't he? And his magic had provided it for him. His magic would probably try to give him everything he wanted of others, if he let it.

I cannot let it.

Hawthorn, Adalrico, Dumbledore, his parents, Sirius, Remus...how many of his altered relationships were the fault of his magic? How many of the changes in the people around him could be traced back to that? Had he leaned on Sirius's fragile mind and snapped it more? Had he drawn his pureblood allies to him when they would rather have stood with the Dark Lord, who at least represented the world they had always known and the ideals they would more naturally fight for? Had he committed worse crimes than Dumbledore's, through not knowing what he was doing?

His parents...

He had cast Fugitivus Animus, a Dark spell, on them almost without thought, solely to ease his own pain, because he wanted to slip out of Hogwarts and die in the middle of his released magic. And he hadn't taken it off since, despite plenty of opportunities to do so. He could have removed it at any time during the summer, at any moment until he left for Hogwarts, at the Quidditch game. Instead, he'd probably only reinforced it when his magic burst free.

And the horrible thing was that he knew that if his parents hadn't been under the influence of the spell, if they had been paying attention to him, he would probably have killed or maimed them.

No matter where I turn, Harry thought, there's no comfort. No matter what I do, I'm going to hurt someone. Snape and Draco might care for me, but I forced them into it. It isn't natural. My magic is entirely unnatural. Dumbledore was right, and Starborn telling me that I could

be a leader is laughable. What am I ever going to be but a Lord, cutting people off from their own ambitions and freedom?

His hands clenched, and the Shack abruptly trembled around him as if it would take flight. Harry smoothed down his rage again. He couldn't allow himself to get angry, even if it was at his own stupidity.

So what is left? Suicide?

He contemplated it calmly enough. He had always known that his chances of survival were not great. If he could die in the War to save Connor, then he could surely die by his own hand to keep from influencing people the wrong way. He would rather die than use compulsion. He had said that. He had felt that. Did he mean it?

And then the world turned around and made sense again.

Connor.

Harry's breathing came easier. He couldn't commit suicide. He had to stay alive for his brother's sake. Not only would Connor be left without protection if Harry died, but he would be devastated by grief. Harry winced at the thought of hurting someone else like that.

Are you sure that you didn't compel him to care for you, too?

No, Harry thought, he wasn't. But he thought it unlikely. His and Connor's love for one another had begun in childhood, when the phoenix web was still there to protect other people from unnatural influences. If there was any relationship in Harry's life that was free of the taint of his magic, it was his bond with his brother.

And perhaps...

Harry sat up and breathed out, slowly. He allowed himself to feel hope, and that was painful, but since when had he been afraid of causing pain to himself? Other people's pain was far more to be feared.

Connor has been learning compulsion magic, he thought. He can teach me techniques, I think. He can teach me how to start controlling this, how to limit the influence my magic has on other people.

Because that was the problem, the crux, the heart of the matter, and why he couldn't simply turn back to the phoenix web and the way things had worked in his childhood, Harry finally admitted to himself. Binding his magic only caused more problems. And he knew that Draco and Snape would struggle and argue with him if he tried to do it, because it would probably take a while before their true personalities returned and they ceased to care about him. He would rather not cause them any more agony than he had to in withdrawing the compulsion.

And there were the promises he had made to Peter, and Snape—even though he had caused some of Snape's sacrifices, such as his reduced loathing of Sirius, and hadn't noticed it—and to Remus, to free him of the Obliviate. There were the implied promises to the creatures in the Forest, even though he didn't know what they were yet, and to the Dementors, and to Fawkes.

For all those, he needed his magic.

I can't bind it, Harry decided, and slid off the bed. I can't ignore it, the way I have been doing. I have to do the harder thing. I have to face it. I have to learn to use it, the way Starborn suggested I do.

He remembered the story of Falco Parkinson, who had died trying to walk this path through his magic, and what Starborn had said in his letter, that other powerful wizards had died or gone mad trying not to be Lords.

Harry laughed, and was glad to hear that it sounded grim, instead of defeated.

Since when has anything in my life been easy?

But to gain some time and space for the training, and to give Draco and Snape time to recover from what he had done to them, he would have to insure that he parted from them for a while.

Harry knew the perfect way.

Neville let him into Gryffindor Tower with no questions asked, and directed Harry to the third-year boys' room when he asked after Connor. Harry found his brother there, pretending to work on a Charms essay but actually chattering with Ron. They both fell silent and stared at him.

Harry took a deep breath and met Connor's eyes. "I promised you once that we would spend all our Christmases together," he said. "And then I broke that promise last year. This year, I don't want to. Can I come home with you over Christmas?"

When Connor's face welled into a smile and he lunged at Harry over the bed, grabbing him in a fierce hug, Harry knew he'd made the right choice.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Christmas With the Potters

Harry wondered idly if it was possible for someone to expire of rage. He supposed he would know in a moment. Snape would either expire of it or finally speak, as he hadn't since Harry had arrived in his office.

Harry lifted his head and calmly met his guardian's gaze. Snape didn't try to use Legilimency on him. He was probably incapable of remembering the incantation right now. Harry waited.

Snape broke.

"You stupid boy," he hissed, lunging up from behind his desk. "What are you thinking? You cannot go back to that befouled place yet, let alone for weeks."

"I've made my decision," said Harry, letting Snape's words roll off him. This was a mindset he hadn't summoned in some time, the one in which everything except Connor ceased to matter. He had forgotten how wonderfully clear and simple everything became when he used it. He still felt rage, and regret, but far stronger was the knowledge that he was doing this for everyone else's own good, even if it was his brother's that came first. "I know that Draco told you about what his father said."

"And it was wrong," Snape said.

Harry tilted his head. "I can't compel other wizards with my magic, then?" It would be good news if it could be true, he mused. It would shatter the nightmare he'd been living in for the past few days, while he avoided Draco and Snape as much as possible and brooded on Lucius's words. Snape had finally managed to corner him and command him to his office. Harry didn't think he had done it in order to wake him up from the nightmare, though.

"You can," said Snape, "but I have not been compelled."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't believe you."

Snape took one long step towards him. Harry went on observing. He wasn't afraid. He didn't feel much of anything, except determination. It was obvious that Snape needed far more time away from him than Harry had thought he did. The claws of his magic were hooked deeply into him.

"I am an Occlumens," said Snape. "Did you think I would not have felt it, Harry?" He was trying to change things back to the way they had been, using his first name, Harry realized. The magic was probably making him do it. Harry's magic obeyed even his unconscious wishes, and Harry really did wish for a waking from the nightmare. It would not happen. He knew that now.

"I think you did feel it first year, sir," said Harry. "And then matters changed. I remember the way that you felt you had to protect me after Tom Riddle's attack."

"Do you remember what Tom Riddle did to your mind?" Snape sounded as if he would start snarling any second. Harry wondered if he should call Remus in. He and Snape could compare ferocious noises.

"Of course I do, sir," said Harry. "That's why everything changed. But my magic was influencing people even under the phoenix web. Draco was changed. You were changed. It just took longer to work on you, since you had the protection of your mental shields." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I would have stopped it if I knew how to control it. I would stop it now if I knew how to control it."

Snape mastered himself with a visible effort. "Harry," he said.

Harry nodded to show he was listening.

"What do you believe would happen if you were suddenly to remove your compulsion from me?" Snape asked. He was leaning forward, his eyes intent on Harry's.

"You would go back to being your normal self, sir," said Harry. "The man you were before I enslaved you."

Snape's voice came out low and cold, the sign of his true anger. "I know what slavery feels like, Harry." He touched his left arm, and the Dark Mark hidden on it. "And you did not enslave me."

"But that's why it's so insidious, sir," said Harry. He was a bit confused. Snape must have read up on the theories of powerful wizards compelling others to follow them from the sheer strength of their magic. He'd been around Voldemort and Dumbledore, both. He would have felt it, from both of them. Why he should refuse to believe that Harry had done it was a mystery. "You didn't notice it. It crept into your mind and your thoughts, and bound you. Even now, it binds you. You think you feel affection for me. You don't, not really." Those words still hurt to say, as they hurt to think, but that was part of the point. Every time Harry thought he had caused himself pain, he remembered that he had caused other people far more.

"I will thank you not to tell me how I feel, Harry," said Snape, and his eyes narrowed further. "You have done a disservice, to me, to yourself, and to Draco. Have you listened to him at all when he tries to speak to you?"

"I did tell him that I was going home for Christmas, sir," Harry said. "He had a screaming fit at me."

Screaming fit was too mild a term for what had happened with Draco, really. Harry had not really wanted to know that Draco thought all those things about his parents and Connor. For a Malfoy, Draco had an extraordinarily foul mouth. Harry thought now that he might have learned those terms from his mother.

"Draco has been to see me," said Snape, and paced one more step forward. Harry was craning his neck back to look up at him. That was all right. He could do this. When he came back after Christmas, Snape would already have noticed the difference, and probably have strengthened his Occlumency shields against the compulsion creeping in again. "He says that he knew about the compulsion beforehand, and that he had already decided to stay friends with you."

"Yes, he told me that, too," said Harry, unmoved.

“And?” Snape probed, his eyes glittering.

Harry shrugged. “The compulsion’s feeding on him, too. He thinks he feels all these things that he really doesn’t. He thinks he made the decision to stay my friend, but he really had it made for him.”

Snape ground his teeth. “And how, Mr. Potter, do you know that, when you have admitted that you do not know how deep your compulsion runs?”

Harry smiled. He knew it was a sad smile. Most of his smiles were, lately. Connor hadn’t been able to understand why. He’d even seemed pleased that Harry had a gift so similar to his own. “Don’t you see, Professor? I can’t take the chance. I have to get away from you for a little while. If your feelings for me change noticeably—and I think they will—then I know that they were the result of my compulsion. But I can’t know that until I test it.”

“And if they do not change?” Snape asked harshly.

Harry let his breath out. “I don’t understand,” he whispered. “As you said, you know what slavery feels like. Why would you want to risk being enslaved if you stay near me? My compulsion could be unusually powerful or far-reaching. It may make some decisions for you and not others. It might influence you on some things and not others. The most horrible part of this is that I can’t ever be sure, and there isn’t one solution that will fix it all. Why would you want to take the chance that you’re being compelled, even if you’re absolutely sure you aren’t?”

Snape moved. Harry had expected the man to stride back behind his desk, or perhaps even raise his wand and unleash a hex, but he knelt down in front of Harry instead. Harry eyed him warily. Snape’s hands twitched, but he made no move to touch Harry, instead gazing at him evenly.

“Harry,” he said softly. “I choose to risk it. When I change my mind about that, you will be the first to know. I chose to help you rebuild your mind. I chose to become your guardian. I chose to teach you the

Potions knowledge that you requested from me. Every choice I have made concerning you since at least the end of last year has been motivated by compassion and admiration and, yes, affection for you. I am absolutely sure of that. I know what slavery feels like. This is not it."

Harry fought to control his own trembling. He tried as hard as he could not to feel anything, not to respond to Snape's declaration. If he did that, then his magic might reach out and compel Snape to recite more of the same words.

Of course, it might do that anyway, responding to wishes that Harry didn't even know he had.

How could he trust himself, ever again?

"Stay here," Snape whispered. It seemed as though the words were choking him. "Do not go to your parents for Christmas. You deserve more than a house full of cheer that does not include you, and parents who will ignore you, or injure you if they ever see you again." He closed his eyes, and held still for a long moment. Harry wondered what was coming. Then Snape forced it out. "Please."

He wouldn't have said that. The magic made him.

I'm compelling him just by standing in the same room with him.

Harry fled.

"Harry."

Harry sighed and tucked an arm around his head. Fawkes, who was sitting with his own head beneath his wing on the foot of the bed, gave a sleepy chirp and huddled down further, fluffing out the feathers on his breast.

The curtains opened, and Draco was there. Harry didn't have to look at him to know he would have his wand out, glowing with Lumos. Draco had been very, very persistent since Lucius's visit. He didn't seem to understand that Harry was trying to give him space to grow

his own personality back. He kept insisting that he knew what he wanted, and Harry had no right to take it away from him.

Harry wanted, desperately, fiercely, to believe him, but how could he?

Draco sat down on the bed beside him this time, and said his name again. Harry waited for the hand that would shake his shoulder and force him to face his friend—his compelled friend, his tamed pet, his something. He felt even worse about what he'd done to Draco than Snape. Snape had resisted the compulsion for a whole year, and Harry also thought he would recover faster. Draco had been under Harry's influence for two and a half years. Harry had deprived him of the person he could have become, the other friends he could have had, the interests and hobbies he might have developed out of Harry's shadow. Guilt writhed like snakes in his belly whenever he thought about it.

Snakes. Sylarana. Oh Merlin, did I compel her too?

"Fine," said Draco, his voice exhausted. "Just listen, then. I have something to tell you, Harry."

Harry did not see what it could be. Draco had already told Harry that he'd known about the compulsion in September, that his mother had sent him books on how to resist it, that he had made his own decisions and renewed his friendship with Harry out of his own free will. Harry did not believe it. Draco had still been too close to him when he was making that decision. And perhaps he might even have fought free, but then Harry had reached out, greedily, selfishly, and dragged him back into the charmed circle.

How many mistakes have I made? The sooner I can get some training from Connor, the better. Connor had already shown him how to concentrate and focus inward, pulling in his will until he barely leaned on the world at all. Harry didn't know how well that would work when all of his magic and not just one specific part of it wanted to change people's minds, but he was hopeful. If he could get away from Hogwarts, then he might even stop wanting so much. He

already knew where he stood with his parents and Remus and Connor. He shouldn't want to alter their behavior.

"Harry," Draco whispered, and then his hand stroked Harry's hair. It felt good. Harry did not want to let it. He closed his eyes, trying his best to withdraw his will from Draco. But the voice followed him into the darkness, even as Harry dived, spinning and cutting among the portions of his mind he'd rebuilt in May.

"I didn't even know about you until I met you on the Hogwarts Express," said Draco. "And then I felt your magic. I felt it as pain, the way that Malfoys always have. I thought you were the Boy-Who-Lived at first, and that you and Connor were playing a joke on me. It wasn't until you named yourself that I realized I was wrong." He hesitated, as though about to say something else, but then went on.

Harry tried to focus on the bridges of magic he'd created across the gulf of his thoughts. He had controlled his own thoughts last year, when he fought Tom Riddle—almost exactly a year ago, now. He ought to be able to confine his magic to himself again, if he really tried. Not bind it forever, certainly, but direct it more specifically than he had so far. Then he would only do what he wanted to do with it.

"I felt so betrayed when I thought you had compelled me all the time, that our friendship was a lie," Draco whispered.

Harry hunched, and then forced himself to lie still and breathe calmly. If he felt too hurt, then he would probably try to soothe the hurt, and that would involve compelling Draco to do things he hadn't agreed to. Breathe slowly and deeply. That was it.

"And then I realized that it didn't matter," Draco said. "There are things in our friendship that couldn't have been compulsion, Harry. Think about it. You saved my life in our first year. You gave me back the life debt, and I used it to force you to do something you didn't want to do, visiting my family at Christmas. I asked you again and again for the full story of what happened with the Dark Lord at the end of first year, and you never gave it to me. You drove me from your mind last year the moment you felt you didn't need my any longer, and I had no ill effects from that. You let me go with you into

the Chamber last year even though you didn't want to, and you could have easily forced me to stay behind. And then this year you've saved my life again and then defended me from my father when you thought I needed it." He paused, as if to draw breath. "There's too much there, Harry. I won't let you dismiss it. And I won't dismiss it, no matter what you think. Even if I find my feelings changing when you leave Hogwarts, I don't care. I'll still be here when you come back, because of that too much. You can't end this friendship because you feel guilty. It's not only yours to end."

Harry wondered dismally why his magic liked yanking affectionate speeches out of people.

Because you want affection, of course. You felt used by your family when the phoenix web lifted. But you could have managed to win affection the normal way, instead of compelling it. That's the way normal wizards would have done it.

"And if you come back from your Christmas broken," Draco whispered, "I swear to Merlin that I'll pick you up and put you back together again."

Harry didn't let himself listen. He would turn around if he did.

Draco eventually went back to his bed, and Harry rolled over again and stared at the closing gap in the curtains where he had been. What scared him most wasn't the declaration itself. He could have expected that Draco would make a declaration like that. The magic was quite capable of getting anything it wanted—or he wanted. That was the more accurate depiction.

What scared him was the calm determination behind Draco's words. Compelled or not, Harry thought it might be a match for his own. Snape ate his breakfast in silence that morning, and watched Black drink the last dose of empathy potion he would have for a time with much less than the usual good humor he felt at the sight. Black and Lupin were going to be in the same house as Harry for weeks at a time.

Snape knew he could have forced the issue. He could have used his legal authority as guardian to make Harry stay.

And that would have shattered his relationship with Harry far more effectively than Lucius's words had.

Snape put down his fork and sighed. He could do nothing. He hated being helpless, and he especially hated to be helpless in the matter of Harry. The boy had suffered enough, and he was going back into the house with the people who had caused the majority of that suffering.

No, he thought, as he watched Black. There is one thing I can do.

"Black," he said.

The man started, slopping pumpkin juice all over his hand, and turned towards him. He really did look bad, Snape thought clinically. His skin was nearly pasty white now, and the circles beneath his eyes looked like bruises. Had he not done what he had done to Harry, Snape might even have been persuaded to care.

"I know that you are going to Godric's Hollow with Harry," he said. "If you do something to hurt him, be assured I will find out. And then I will hunt you down and kill you."

Black stared at him for a moment. Then he said, "You would go to Azkaban."

"I don't care," said Snape. "I will torture you before I kill you—one hour for every year I expect to spend in Azkaban. It cannot make up for what you have done to Harry, but be assured, it would satisfy me. And the torture would make what your brother suffered at Voldemort's hands look kind."

Black gave a stifled cry at the mention of Regulus. He clenched his hand beneath the table, then said, "I could tell Albus that you threatened me, and he would—"

"He would do nothing," said Snape. "Not when he needs me."

"Potions Masters can be replaced," said Black.

Snape snorted. "You are a fool if you think that is all he needs me for. And a threat is only a threat, Black." He held the other man's eyes and lowered his voice until he was sure that every word was burning past Black's ears. "It need not become real unless you take some action yourself. Remember. Any torture you inflict is cause for your own death by torture."

Black stared at him with wide eyes. Then he stood and bolted out of the room.

Snape leaned back in his chair, and avoided Albus's inquisitive gaze. He brooded on Harry instead, sitting at the end of the Slytherin table and ignoring every attempt from his Housemates to initiate a conversation.

I let him go into danger, in the knowledge that holding him back would be worse.

Is this what all parents feel about their children?

So far, Harry thought, stretched out on the couch in front of the fireplace but poised to shift if one of their parents should come over and try to sit down on him, Christmas with his family had been all right.

His parents ignored him utterly, of course, and Sirius did much the same thing, as though he had gone back to being under Fugitivus Animus. Harry had his suspicions about that, since he had seen Sirius flee the Great Hall soon after Snape spoke to him on their last morning at Hogwarts, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was making a great effort not to even think about Snape, so that his magic wouldn't decide that he needed the Potions Master and try to compel his feelings again.

But Harry had Connor's attention, and that was always glorious. Connor spent many hours working with Harry on training his compulsion, showing him the calming process he'd learned from Sirius, and how to aim his will and push it out towards a single target,

rather than simply spread it out and let it dangle in the air. And he spent many hours with Harry when he didn't have to, when their parents would have been happy to speak with him or play with him or pamper him silly. They talked about the history Connor was learning, and Quidditch, and Connor had already promised that Harry would get a few of his Christmas gifts, since Lily and James didn't think to buy him any.

Couldn't think to buy him any, Harry told himself firmly. He always wanted to remember whose fault this was. Forget who was to blame, and he stood a good chance of turning into one of the compellers Connor had warned him solemnly about, the ones who simply used their gifts to order everyone around because they thought it was their right to do that, by virtue of being born with the magic. Compellers had to be careful of their impact on the world, Connor had said earnestly. That was why it had been such a relief to him to find out that his gift was of the Light from Griphook Fishbaggin's book. That meant he would never have to worry about the impact he made.

Harry knew he couldn't be assured of such prophesized status himself, so he was concentrating. And he thought it worked. The first day he was home, a bit of bread had skimmed out of the kitchen and into his hand when he was barely aware he was hungry. Now, on Christmas Eve, he really had to concentrate to summon the simplest of objects, and his magic certainly wasn't attending to his subconscious desires.

That you can tell.

There was always that, of course. Nevertheless, Harry thought he had a right to be cautiously pleased.

"Harry? Can I talk to you?"

Harry blinked and put down his book, which was a review of wizarding history he already knew but wanted to brush up on, this time playing special attention to the role that Lords had played. "Sure, Remus," he said, shifting his legs aside so that the werewolf could sit down on the couch opposite him. Remus was shaking, and Harry studied him carefully. "Do you need more Wolfsbane?"

Remus shook his head tightly. The full moon was still a few days away, Harry remembered then. Silly of me to forget. He smiled apologetically and sat up. “What is it?” he asked, when Remus kept silent.

Remus flattened his hands in front of him. “I think you should know why I refused to let you remove the Obliviate,” he said.

Harry felt his insides curl up and freeze. He didn’t want to talk about anything associated with Hogwarts here—

But of course he couldn’t escape it, not when Connor’s every second conversation with their parents was about that. And he had promised to help Remus heal. It was progress, that he was willing to talk about this. Harry made himself nod.

“Tell me,” he said gently, and tried not to reflect how much he sounded like their mum when she was coaxing some small envy or petty hurt out of him.

Remus let out a breath. “Do you know close I came to killing Severus, when Sirius played that prank?” he asked.

Harry jerked at the mention of Snape, and then forced his body still when Remus gave him a curious glance. Neither Sirius nor Remus—nor Connor, for that matter—knew about his changed relationship with Snape, or the reason that Harry had come to Godric’s Hollow for the holidays instead of staying with him. And Harry didn’t want them finding out, either.

Of course, blessed with a werewolf’s nose, Remus was sniffing. “Why do you smell so fearful, Harry?” he asked gently.

“We weren’t talking about me,” said Harry. “We were talking about you.”

It was a clumsy maneuver, but he had thought that Remus must really want to talk about this in order to seek him out, and that meant

he was vulnerable to distraction. It turned out to be true. Remus's face clouded, and he gave a difficult nod.

"Of course we were," said Remus. "Do you know how close I came?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Dad only ever explained about the prank in its bare outlines, and how he saved Snape's life, and how Snape owes him a life debt for it." He could speak the words calmly, including his guardian's name, he thought. He could. See? He had just done it.

"Very close," Remus whispered. "And I still remember the anger that filled me, that savage, mindless bloodlust to kill and kill. I know it affected Severus too, of course, but it left its mark on the beast in me. At the full moon, in the brief moment when I change and before the Wolfsbane Potion lets me get control back, the beast wakes up and remembers that moment."

"Why?" Harry asked, puzzled. Remus had transformed dozens of times in his life by now. Why would that one transformation matter so much?

Remus smiled grimly. "Because," he said, "Severus got away. The beast never wants anyone to get away."

Harry swallowed. Remus nodded. His face was calm, but his eyes were burning.

"There is no compromise with this thing in me, Harry," he said. "Understand. I'm not a wolf. I'm a werewolf. This is a disease. A curse."

"I knew that," Harry whispered.

"Yes, but you don't understand," said Remus. "Fenrir Greyback bit me as a child. Do you know why he likes to bite children?"

"To punish their families," said Harry, remembering that part of the history of the First War.

"Only partially," said Remus quietly. "Many bitten children die, but if we survive, we adapt differently to the curse, since we took it into our bodies so young. The beast's rage becomes ours. When we get angry, we get angry the way a werewolf would." He took a deep breath and spread one hand in front of him. "I'm not rational when I'm in a rage, Harry. I've been tempted to bite people before."

He met Harry's eyes directly. "And since I know I would be angry when I found out the memories behind the Obliviate, I don't want it removed. I would essentially be a werewolf without the transformation." He leaned forward. "Can you imagine being that angry with your own friends, Harry? I don't want to. I know that there would be no going back once I learned what they did to you. And it would be because of me, not them. They may have done unforgivable things, but I would do unforgivable things, too, in my anger."

Harry shuddered as he remembered the cold, black, silent rage that had welled out of him in the Chamber of Secrets. Remus was wrong. Harry understood all too well. He had his own curse, though as far as he knew, there was no potion that could aid him in controlling it.

"But, at the same time," Remus whispered, "I want to know. I look at Sirius and James and Lily, and it's like I don't know them at all anymore. I wonder what's behind the masks."

Harry said nothing. He didn't know what he could say. Remus was the one who had to make this decision. Harry couldn't make it for him—wouldn't make it for him, not if someone told him he had to make it or die. He had said he would rather die than compel someone else.

Yes, I do mean it, he realized, in a rush of wonder and relief. He hadn't been sure that he did.

"I know Lily was a good woman," Remus whispered. "I know that Sirius and James were good men. But were, were, were. I don't know if they really are the people I thought they were anymore." He smiled grimly. "And I think I'm most terrified of discovering they never were the people I thought they were."

"Remus," Harry asked, because he had to ask, "why did you stand aside and let Peter go to Azkaban, knowing he was innocent? And why did you never tell me the truth?"

"At first?" Remus asked lowly. "Because Albus asked, and I trusted him. And I saw Sirius after the spell finally broke and Regulus died. He looked worse than now. I spent days with him in a room while he screamed, nights with him while he had nightmare after nightmare. He wanted to forget, to let the whole thing die, to let Regulus pass out of memory. And I was willing to give him anything he wanted, to enable myself to forget his suffering."

"What about Peter?" Harry asked. He knew his voice was sharpening towards accusation, but it was okay to let it, he assured himself. He was angry on someone else's behalf, and not his own.

"I never valued him as much as the others," said Remus. Though his voice obviously scraped his throat, he admitted it readily. This was an ugly fact he had made his peace with a long time ago, Harry realized. "James, Sirius, me—we were the close friends. Peter was the sidekick, the tagalong. We all felt that way. I don't think we ever realized it until Albus tested us, but we did."

Harry looked aside. He didn't know what to say, again. No wonder it had been easy for Voldemort to believe that Peter was sick of being in his friends' shadows, he thought. It might even have been partially true.

"I know that I'll have to come to my own decisions, and you have to come to your own," said Remus, placing one hand on Harry's shoulder as he rose. "But I wanted you to know that I'm afraid of my own anger. It's cowardice, Harry, but it's a specific kind of cowardice." For a moment, his smile flashed, knowing, self-deprecating, more like the old Remus.

Then it vanished, and he limped from the room.

Harry spent the rest of that afternoon on the couch, since no one else insisted on coming over and sitting down, and Connor was playing

some game with Sirius that made his laughter scatter around the house like butterflies. He thought about what Remus had said about making his own decisions.

He thought of something he could do near the evening.

Thoughts chased themselves around his head as he considered it.

Do you really want to do it? Are you sure?

But no matter what objections he came up with, they always slammed straight into the inflexible barrier of his principles. It didn't matter if he wanted to do it or not. He had said that he would die before he used compulsion. He wanted to work to undo it. He couldn't do it with Remus, because Remus had to choose, and had the ability to choose, now that he knew he was missing memories.

But there were others in the house whom Harry had compelled, directly, and who would not get a chance to choose.

And Harry was tired—tired of being alone except for his twin and Remus, tired of not having a parent except one whom he had magically compelled in one way or another.

He missed his mum.

He stood up, slowly, at last, and when dinner was finished, he went into the kitchen. Lily was alone there, charming the dishes to zip around and clean themselves. Harry could hear laughter from upstairs, where Sirius and Connor had now pulled James into the game, which seemed to be a card game, from the sound of it. Remus had already gone home; the fatigue of the approaching full moon had been affecting him. Besides, he'd joked, he wanted to be ready for Christmas the next morning.

Harry took a deep breath, and listened for a long moment. Laughter, and soft music from the WWN in the other room, and his mother's voice lifting in small breathy snatches of melody as she sang along with it.

He didn't draw his wand, because he thought he should end this the same way he had started it. He focused all his will, and raised his power to the level it had been when he left the Chamber of Secrets, and whispered, "Finite Incantatem."

He felt the snapping and parting of the Fugitivus Animus from Lily's mind. Her thoughts brightened, sharpened, shifted.

Then she froze.

The dishes hovered in place for a moment. Lily at last made a jerky gesture, and they clattered back onto the table and the counter. She stood in silence for another moment more, and her breathing matched Harry's in rapidity. Harry thought her heartbeat probably did, too, though he couldn't hear hers.

Then, slowly, inch by inch, she turned to face him, until a pair of wide green eyes were staring at him, the twins of his own.

"Hi, Mum," said Harry softly.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Harry And His Mother Have a Little Chat

Things fell and shifted and crashed into place in Lily's mind, and she knew, now, what had sometimes made her pause in the last months and question her own sanity, that she had a sense of a person missing from the family.

Someone had been missing from the family. Someone who had just announced his return by lifting the spells that had obscured her memory of him.

Lily met her son's eyes, and saw the power that burned there, unbound. Harry might think he was shielding everyone else from the effects of his magic, but he wasn't, not really. Fear waited to tear Lily apart if she thought about it, heart-rending, soul-shrinking fear.

But the Headmaster had sent her a letter months ago, one that Lily had kept in spite of not knowing what it referred to. It had two lines on it. One was six words long.

The other said simply You will know what to do with this when the time comes.

And she did know what to do with it, Lily found, as she stared back at Harry. It would hurt to do it, but she would do it anyway. It was only one more sacrifice in a long string of them.

I am not, Lily thought, as she stared at her elder son, the son with her eyes and her soul, any stranger to sacrifices.

Harry waited. His mother only went on looking at him, as though she didn't know whether to hug him or burst into tears or lunge away in terror. Harry hoped it wouldn't be that last, but he feared it would be.

He couldn't speak, himself. The memories overwhelmed him. This was his mother, the woman who had trained him and given him purpose in life and made him so much of what he was, the aspects of his personality he had told Snape coddling him like a child would not change. She had hurt him. He could acknowledge that, even feel it. She had not done things the best way.

But she had taught him the meaning of sacrifice, and of facing war without flinching. That was the real reason Harry had wanted her back, so that he could look into her eyes and know that at least one other person understood what he had given up. Oh, Snape and Draco tried, but they could only glimpse memories before becoming upset (though he had probably compelled their anger and horror, too). Lily had been there with him all along. Hurt or no hurt, she understood him as no one else in the world would ever do.

And she had been a Gryffindor, and had made a decision to sacrifice her own child, perhaps both of them, if Connor had not stopped Voldemort that night. She was no stranger to courage. She took a deep breath now, and stepped away from the counter, all the time keeping her eyes on his face.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

Harry tucked all the emotions that wanted to burst out of him behind a calm mask. He wasn't entirely sure what would happen if he let them go now. A storm of laughter or a storm of tears, maybe. He took a deep breath in turn. "I suppose you're wondering what I did to you," he said.

"I do wonder what specific spell you used, yes." Lily's voice was as calm as his.

"Fugitus Animus," said Harry. "On both you and Father. Sirius broke it months ago, but that's only because he has the compulsion gift."

Lily's eyes widened for a moment. Then they narrowed. "Dark magic?" she whispered. "Oh, Harry, I would have hoped you knew better."

Harry clasped his hands together behind his back. They writhed and twisted, and he wished Sylarana were with him, to do something that would soothe or drain away the intense feelings running through him. It was like having a river just under the surface of his skin.

"I know," he said. "But I wanted to use it. I was frightened that I would hurt you if you didn't ignore me, if you tried to talk to me, if you tried to hurt me as you had been doing."

Lily shook her head. "I thought you would have understood that any pain you went through was for Connor's sake," she said.

Harry swallowed. Then he swallowed again, and when he was sure he would speak words and not a spell, said, "Even the pain of the phoenix web?"

Lily jerked as if he'd hit her, but nodded. "Yes," she said. "You must know the circumstances of how you received the web now, if you're able to think so independently of it. You know that you consented, and that we did it because we were afraid for Connor's life."

Harry shook his head. "When we were four?"

"Yes," said Lily. "Your magic is unnatural, Harry, unnatural in its strength and the way it kept growing. We tried other bindings, and none of them worked. The magic shrugged them all off." She closed her eyes, and the memory of bitterness was in her face and her voice. "We lived in terror daily, waiting for the moment when you would turn on us."

"But I didn't," Harry whispered.

"You were bound before you could," Lily corrected him.

Harry swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed. "Why did you think I was like Voldemort?" He didn't realize the question was welling up his throat before he asked it. "Why not like Dumbledore?"

"Because your magic grew the way it did," said Lily softly. "You were siphoning off something else, Harry. Your magic came from some other source. It was the only explanation for the way it increased. Who knew when you would turn and start siphoning off us?" She closed her eyes. "It was like living with a vampire. I told Albus it was like living with a tiger, but a tiger only tears you limb from limb. A

vampire feeds. Maybe you were even feeding from Connor. We didn't know. We couldn't tell."

Harry watched from the back of his mind while his thoughts reeled, as though someone had punched him in the solar plexus. He'd surrounded himself with a thick layer of fuzz and shock to keep from going completely mad at once.

Wonderful. Something else I can't control. Not only do I compel other wizards, I feed from them. Did even Voldemort do that?

"I've never felt myself doing it," he managed to say. The words crawled over the jumbled shards of sanity in his throat. "I don't think I did it."

"But you could have," said Lily, and in her eyes was the same terror that looked back at Harry from the mirror, when he bothered to confront it. "How could anyone ever know? So we bound you. We needed a secure future for Connor, Harry. Surely you can understand. You were made part of securing that future, instead of threatening it."

Harry felt the deep surge in his soul, the recognition, as the words touched the bit of the phoenix web that was left to him. He had trained to defend Connor. That had been his whole life until he went to Hogwarts. How could he dispute what Lily was saying? Wouldn't he have urged them to put the web on him, if he had known this about himself and understood the issues involved?

He swallowed. "You could have told me when I was old enough," he said. "Asked me if I wanted the web when I really understood it."

Why am I complaining?

But he knew the answer. It was the same reason he had lifted the Fugitivus Animus spell from Lily instead of simply letting her remain under it. A false peace was no peace at all. The kind of progress he could achieve with his mother ignoring him was nothing to the progress he could achieve if she backed him. And while he could work through the answers on his own, perhaps, fumble and stumble until he was finally as loyal to Connor as he had ever been, he

wanted her to tell him. She had always reassured him before this. She must have the answers to this, too. He would drag out all the questions and have her answer them once and for all. Then he need never trouble with it again.

“We could not have,” said Lily. “And four was old enough, Harry. Not for other children, but for you.”

I want Sylarana. I want Connor. I want Draco. I want this to end.

But it would not end until he reached the end of it, until he’d heard everything, so Harry asked, “Why did you decide to train me into Connor’s guardian, then? Was that another way of binding me? I know the training started even before the phoenix web was cast.”

Lily shook her head. “That was the prophecy,” she said. “The prophecy said that you were to play your destined role as Connor’s guide and guardian. He needed someone to shield him. He needed someone who would always love him, no matter what happened, no matter what he might do. And we determined that that person was to be you.”

Harry frowned. He debated not asking about the uncertainty that had just burst into his mind, but then it would just pop up again at some point, and he wanted this done with. He asked. “If the prophecy bound me to a certain future as Connor’s guardian, then it should have happened anyway, whether or not you trained me as a weapon or to love him. And you shouldn’t have needed the phoenix web. You knew that Connor had to live to defeat Voldemort, and I had to guard him until then, not drain his power.”

The terror in Lily’s eyes deepened exponentially. Harry blinked at her. Why would she fear me knowing about this thing? Why would she fear it more than my having my magic unbound?

“Harry,” Lily whispered, “I never thought of it that way before.”

Harry felt his eyes freeze. “What?”

Lily was staring past him at the wall. "How could I have?" she asked, and Harry had the feeling that she was talking to herself now. "I never—I never thought to ask how true the prophecy was. I just trusted Albus's word that it would come true, but that we all had to do our parts to make it come true the right way. And that sometimes prophecies are tricky, and it might actually let something bad happen to Connor while still letting him defeat Voldemort. Why did I never think about the contradiction between the wording and what we needed to do?" She stared at the floor. "I was so sure that you would hurt Connor, and you could have, and we were reeling from the War, but I...I never phrased it to myself like that. I just never." She hunched and stared at her hands without finishing the last sentence.

Harry took a step forward. He could feel himself quivering. His eyes stung as though dust had got into them, which he did not understand, but he was not going to worry about the sensation, not when his mother was in front of him speaking words he had never thought he would hear. "What?"

Lily's face was wizened with sorrow. "Oh, Merlin," she said, and Harry could barely hear her. "What have I done? What have I done to one of my children, in the name of war?"

A deep richness filled Harry's chest, and somewhere within him, a pain he hadn't realized he was feeling stopped. "What?" he whispered again.

Lily began to cry. She did it silently, and Harry knew the shudders that shook her were real, that the disgust and fear behind her shaking shoulders was real, that the way her voice trembled when she finally managed to speak was real. "I d-didn't, oh, Harry, oh in the name of magic." She had her head in her hands now, and the words sounded as though someone were tearing them out of her throat with a fishhook. "What have I done? What have I done?"

Harry put his hands up in front of his eyes. His own fingers shook against his skin. He had a headache. He swallowed again and again, and tried to remind himself of what Snape had said—that this was a befouled place, that he could not trust his mother.

This was his mother.

Yes, she is, he thought, and forced himself to speak again. "Mother, are you—are you sorry for what you did?"

"Yes," said Lily, and the word broke halfway through the middle into a huge, gasping sob. "I, I can't believe, such a blind fool, what the fuck was I thinking, oh Harry. Apologies aren't enough." She abruptly plunged a hand into her robe pocket and drew out her wand, lifting it towards her own temple.

Harry lunged forward, catching her wrist. Lily stared up at him, much smaller than he ever remembered her being, bleeding in heart if not in body, and terribly, terribly vulnerable. Harry knew that he could unleash the full force of his temper on her now, and she would never recover. Snape certainly would have urged him to do so.

Snape is more vengeful than I will ever be.

"What were you going to do?" he whispered.

"Kill myself," said Lily, her voice utterly flat. "I know that an Avada Kedavra is deadly from this close." She laughed, and the sound rattled in Harry's ears like bones bouncing off rocks. "I certainly had enough chances to see that in this war I've sacrificed everything in the name of, didn't I?"

Harry found himself able to breathe again. A soaring feeling filled his chest, as though he were in flight and aiming straight towards the sun.

She's my mother. And she loves me. And she's sorry.

"Don't," he said. "It would be too easy. And think about the way it would hurt Connor. And me," he was able to say, and it was without guilt for the first time in his life. "You have to stay here and face what you've done."

Lily's face had had little color left. Now it washed completely, and left her eyes shining in her face like a werewolf's through the darkness. "Everything?" she whispered.

"Everything," Harry confirmed. His tongue felt thick and heavy, and he groped for words. His heartbeat sounded in his ears, the door of a sepulcher closed over and over. "The sacrifices you demanded of me, the sacrifices you demanded of Peter, the sacrifices you demanded of Connor. He doesn't know anything about this. He should have known long ago. I should have told him, but so should you. We have to tell him why I made you and Dad forget me. We have to tell him that I've been guarding him. Everything. Everything."

He could have been standing on a field at sunrise, with a cool breeze from the east fanning his face. That complete was his hope, his joy, his feeling of sweetness.

It will take a lot of work, but... things are going to be all right. Things are really going to be all right. I'll have a family again. Mum will apologize for her mistakes. We'll endure Connor's anger, and get past it, and Dad's fear of himself, and get past it. We'll help Sirius and Remus. We'll be a family again.

Remus. I have to tell him that he was right about Mum, that she really is a good woman, that she would die before harming one of her children.

Harry felt his mother nod. It was a tiny, fragile moment, but he held her eyes, and silently challenged her to make it again.

She did.

Harry felt as though his heart would burst. It was too much for him to comprehend, that he was going to have something so much better than what he'd dared to look for. He would have peace. He would not have to worry any longer about training his magic, because his mother would help him train it. She had come up with a kind of complicated training that a child could still master, and increased it in complexity every year, so that he had gradually learned it, never pushing him too fast. She was a natural teacher. She could help him learn to control his compulsive and his feeding magic, too.

There's so much that's good in the world, he thought in wonder.

"Harry," Lily whispered. "I don't know how you can ever accept all the apologies I want to give."

"I'll manage," said Harry, smiling ridiculously and not caring who saw it. "Come on." He hugged her close. "Do you think you can stand up and make it up the stairs to Connor and Dad and Sirius?"

"Yes," Lily said, and gave a half-choked laugh. "Why not? I've done so much. Why not this?"

Harry laughed aloud, and then helped her stand up. He looked up at her, and knew that his eyes were shining. Hers were shadowed, but that was only to be expected.

Then he heard what she was saying.

"Expleo penuriam cum tex—"

She was trying to cast the phoenix web on him again.

After saying she understood. After saying she would try. After.

Realization crashed home. Harry felt the image of his beloved mother shatter into six pieces, into six thousand, into six million. She was gone, the woman who had done only what she thought best, the woman who had trained him out of concern for the fate of the world, the woman who had loved him.

She would never do this. Not if she loved me.

Lance to a boil, mercy cut to a throat, final and absolute betrayal of trust. Perhaps Harry was an evil person for thinking so, but he was not capable of forgiving her for this.

“—tura! Phoenix texturae!”

The spell came at him and bounced. Harry's magic was hovering in front of him, spread over him like enormous, shimmering wings. Of

course the spell bounced. He was not going to let himself be bound, not ever again.

Harry looked at his mother, and felt the insanity rise, shrieking. Her eyes were wide with terror again, and he could do it. He could strike. He could deprive her of life, and how she deserved it for what she had done to him, how she—

No.

Harry seized control of the insanity. He was master here, not his rage. He kept saying so. It was time he proved it.

No one to demonstrate it to, this time, except himself.

And he did have a way of demonstrating it.

Harry took a deep breath, grasped his thoughts, and forced them into the channels that he had worked so hard to learn, the channels of pureblood ritual and tradition. Such a response would have been natural to a wizard raised in a pureblood home. Harry hadn't been, but he had studied until he could dance in his sleep.

And there was a dance for this. There was a dance for most everything.

He put out a hand. He was not sure that the item he wanted would come to him. For all he knew, James's grandparents might have destroyed it. Or perhaps his parents' ignorance of him for the last six months and his legal guardianship by Snape would confuse the thing.

Then I'll create one, he thought, and the thoughts rose and echoed from a vast silence within him, which matched the silence in the kitchen. But, for now, I want it.

And then it was there, slamming into being, settling into his palm very delicately for an item that had been called from Merlin knew how many miles away. Harry studied it for a long moment. As he had expected, it was a simple box, the sides made of rowan wood, with a silver lid. On the lid was engraved a simple P.

It was covered with dust. No Potter had used it in a very long time, then.

Harry raised his eyes to his mother's.

"What you have done to me cannot be forgiven," he said, beginning the ritual with a sense of relief. Already, the magic was taking hold, calming his own magic, bending it to this one specific task, and insuring that Lily could not leave and no one else could enter the room until it was finished. This dance was the best of them all for this particular moment, designed to contain anger and to end it. "I have no wish to face you in a duel, nor to arrange legal means of settling the insult. Both of them would involve seeing you again, and I have no wish to do that, either.

"Therefore, I will take a payment from you, a weregild for all that you have done to me. One time, one shattering price for another shattering price, one apology made in terms that I have decided. We need never see each other again. We will make the exchange, and it will be done." He took a deep breath, because this was the last conscious step of the dance, and the test. "Last time pays for all."

And it worked. The kitchen slammed into red and yellow light, as though fire had burst into being through the walls and the air. Harry could feel magic older and stronger than he had ever dealt with swirling through the room, sucking the breath from his lungs and binding Lily in place, to take the price from her that he had demanded.

I was right. She did do me an injustice. Had it not been a true injustice, then the dance would have failed and the magic would have snatched his chosen price from him instead, for daring to invoke it on an innocent.

Harry held the box aloft and opened it. He had no choice anymore. The magic of justice was clutching at him, and it was implacable. The same magic tugged the words from him, the words that always varied every time this ritual was performed, but were what the invoker must say.

"I can never be safe so long as you would bind me with the phoenix web. I am going to make sure you can't. And this is it. This is all I need to satisfy my anger. I never want to see you again."

The ritual acted. The red and golden glow became fire, a huge scarlet hand.

It reached out and stripped Lily's magic from her.

Lily screamed as the fingers swept through her body, down from the aura and within, searching out every last bit of power she possessed. Out it funneled as glowing blue light, a delicate counterpoint to the red and golden flame. For a moment, it hovered around her, as though reluctant to leave.

Justice tore it away, and flew to the box that Harry held, and deposited Lily's magic within it. The silver lid slammed down and locked.

Harry released the box. It spun in midair, the rowan wood sides bucking for a moment. Harry watched narrowly. It wasn't often that a reparations box was asked to contain a price so powerful. It was far more likely to hold a certain amount of blood or flesh than magic.

And then the sides settled, and another box appeared, spinning lazily beside the first one. This one was empty, as Harry could see from the flapping lid. It vanished, for use at a later time, and the first one, the full one, followed it.

That was it, Harry thought, as he watched them go. Anything put into a reparations box could never be pulled out again. He wouldn't use or swallow his mother's magic, no matter how much he might be tempted. He trusted the pureblood ritual as he did not trust himself.

His mother was crumpled on the floor now, and Harry understood the difference between the brokenness she had feigned to lure him close and the real thing. He didn't want to look at it for long. It simply made him feel tired.

A wind pushed at his back. The ritual had taken his justice for him, and now it remained up to him to obey his part of the bargain. He had said that he never wanted to see his mother again. The magic was not about to let him remain and contradict that by hexing her, especially when it had just made her a Muggle.

He would have to leave.

Harry had barely thought that when he realized that some of the red and gold shadows in the room had altered; they were growing brighter, instead of darker. Harry blinked and turned to face them. The magic of the ritual was supposed to be fading away, as long as he left. Had something gone wrong?

Then the red and gold burst into flame, and Fawkes flew over to him. He hovered in front of him, and Harry couldn't see anything except black eyes cocooned in a nest of golden feathers. Fawkes crooned gently to him. The sight of his wings shielded Harry from the sight of his mother.

Harry, raw and aching and with his magic wide open, could understand the phoenix's intention, though still not his words. He nodded.

"Yes, please," he whispered. "Show me where to go."

Fawkes spread his wings wider, until he appeared to float in the air, rather than flying there. Harry watched golden leaves sprout from those wings, shining things of light and song, flapping gently around him and enclosing him in bright walls. They reminded him of the phoenix web for a moment, but he quelled that thought, and instead studied the world that he now stood in.

Where am I?

He understood almost instantly. He was riding Fawkes's fire, in the world that Fawkes flew through, when he vanished and appeared between one place and another. It was a beautiful world. Gauzy veils of scarlet and orange overlapped each other. Blue and gold surged in dazzling fountains that sprang and built off one another, soaring

upwards in arched loops. Now and then, a brilliant white point winked into existence, hovered, like the sun, too bright to look at, and then vanished.

And the heat. Heat everywhere.

Harry felt it chase into him and warm away the last bits of the freezing cold rage. He smiled, slightly. He wouldn't be able to share this with Fawkes every time, but he could share it right now, with his magic wondrously free and his mind purged of some of the poison it had carried for so long.

And he knew, beyond all doubt, that Fawkes had offered this up to him freely, that he had in no way compelled it.

He extended a hand. Fire licked around him, tame and playful this one time, wound on his fingers and purred like a Kneazle. Snakes of glittering red crowned his hair. Harry felt himself laughing as the flames poured down his throat and tickled him, and if he didn't sound entirely sane, well, he didn't think he was entirely sane at the moment. But then, neither was the fire.

A word began to echo around him, a word that he had only heard a few times, but which repeated and rustled like the fire, as though it were the voice of the flames.

Vates. Vatesvatesvatesvates.

I suppose I am that, then, Harry thought, with a calm that he knew was artificial, forced on him by the remnants of the ritual and Fawkes's magic. But so? A pureblood wizard would be able to accept this. He would be able to accept it, too, since he was thinking like a pureblood wizard at the moment. Far be it from a pureblood wizard to be afraid of his own magic.

For a moment, his grip on the thoughts slipped, and he saw the vast gulf beneath him, the gulf where he would have to think about what his mother had done—

And he twisted away, and renewed his grasp on the learned thoughts. It was over. It was done. He had claimed his payment from her, and it was done. This time, there truly was no turning back and letting her hurt him again. The magic of justice had agreed with him that there was justice to be done, and Connor and James and she would just have to learn to live with it.

Last time pays for all.

The rustling, rasping voices subsided, and then the fire fell away altogether. Harry caught a brief glimpse of a white world, and knew that Fawkes had borne him somewhere familiar, on a snowy night. But before the fire let him go completely, it exhaled and breathed out across the whiteness in a shining array of nets.

Harry stared in silence at the nets, and then the misty glimpses of figures they connected to, figures who appeared at the ends of the threads like fish on a line.

House elves. Centaurs. Dementors. Unicorns. Dragons. Goblins. Runespoors. Werewolves. Giants. Merfolk. Hundreds and hundreds of others, all connected, all bound, all tied.

All compelled.

The wizarding world was built on webs, hundreds of them, thousands of them, ancient and interconnected. Harry wondered how he could unbind all of them.

And then the vision vanished, and Harry saw Fawkes sitting on a bare, icy tree branch in front of him, regarding him calmly. His head was tilted to one side, his eye a glittering black gem in the midst of the feathers. He uttered a long, slow croon.

“He says that that is why you are the vates. You will figure out a way.”

Harry turned and nodded to Dobby. He wasn’t surprised to see the house elf. He was incapable of being surprised right now, he thought. Too much had happened, and he was holding very, very tightly to the patterns that were keeping him sane.

"Hello, Dobby," he said. "Will you please run and ask Mr. Malfoy if he minds very much having me as a guest for Christmas?"

Dobby bowed. "Dobby would be delighted," he said with dignity, and vanished.

Harry stamped his feet and blew on his hands, warming himself in the cold. All around him lay snow. Overhead lay stars. In front of him, surrounded by its wards like a crown of blades, lay Malfoy Manor.

"You brought me here for a reason, didn't you?" he asked Fawkes.

The phoenix crooned again, this time a smug sound, and then fluttered off his branch and landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry relaxed, letting the warmth from the feathers drain into him. He stroked Fawkes's neck and wondered idly if Lucius would really let him stay. He had sent no truce gift for solstice so far. Harry had thought he was allied with him, but he really had no idea what had happened since he kept away from Draco.

That will have to stop, he thought. Until they officially dissolve anything that we put between us, they are still my allies, and I can't afford to keep away from them.

Would his presence mean compelling Draco?

Harry forced himself not to worry about it. He would ask for guest-rights. Lucius could let him in or deny him. If he denied him, there were other places to go. If he accepted him, that meant he was accepting the risk of his son's mind possibly being influenced, not to mention his wife's and his own.

Draco would take it further than that, of course. He would insist that they settle matters on a more personal level. But Harry felt as though he could accept that. He could accept anything at the moment. There really was a dance for most everything.

Dobby appeared just then. "Mr. Malfoy says that Mr. Harry Potter is welcome in his home, sir," he said, bowing his head.

Harry smiled distantly. He was glad that Lucius had decided to stop being stupid.

Applies to more people than just him, doesn't it?

"Mr. Malfoy says that he hopes Mr. Harry Potter will accept his apologies," Dobby added, his too-large eyes peering hard at Harry.

Harry nodded. "Please go ahead of me, and tell him that if I can forgive him for the diary, then I can forgive him for this."

Dobby nodded, and vanished again, just as the Manor's door flew open and Draco's voice shouted, "Harry! Harry!"

Harry took a deep breath, and did the second hardest thing he'd done all evening: he started forward, instead of away. He was within the wards in moments, with them parting for him like curtains, and then he was walking across the snow, his feet making brisk sloppy sounds, Fawkes shifting on his shoulder as though to get more comfortable.

Fawkes was forced to take to the air with a startled squawk when Draco grabbed him and knocked them both into the snow, but Harry didn't really mind. He grabbed Draco, and held on tight, and thought about guest-rights and letting other pureblood wizards take risks, and nothing else.

What he really didn't understand, a moment later, was why the dusty feeling returned to his eyes, and his face twitched, and he then burst into tears. And he let Draco escort him into the warmth and light of the Manor, because while there really was a dance for most everything, there wasn't a dance for this.

Interlude: Another Letter From Severus Snape

December 24th, 1993

To: Hellebore Shiverwood

Department of Magical Family and Child Services

Dear Madam Shiverwood,

My name is Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I have found myself rather unexpectedly taking charge of a thirteen-year-old boy after long years in which I had no children of my own. If you have been following the Daily Prophet, you have learned by now that this child is Harry Potter, the twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived.

I find myself quite anxious to make sure that I am doing the right thing. While I had a pureblood mother and was raised with full knowledge of many wizarding laws and customs, my father was a Muggle, and I had learned before I was seven to expect no children of my own. Therefore, my mother neglected to teach me the many pureblood dances that deal with the relations between parents and children. I would like to request information from your department so that Harry might know the pureblood side of his heritage, and also to know how the Ministry approves of treating children.

The Ministry's good opinion is important to me. While the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour, recently visited Harry and me, and was gracious enough to say that he thought Harry could remain with me, I would appreciate it deeply if the Department in the Ministry most concerned with cases like mine and Harry's could make a recommendation concerning his treatment. It is only because of the unusual nature of Harry's case that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and not your office has handled it. I would trust your advice more than theirs.

I understand that some of the information that I am requesting—anything connected with the laws on child-care, for example—is sensitive. Please be assured I would not have written this letter were I

not concerned for the welfare of my ward. This information shall be used only to benefit him.

With respect,

I remain,

Severus Snape.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Compulsion Against Compulsion

Snape recovered from the dizzying swirl of the Portkey, which an owl had delivered to him along with Narcissa's letter, and looked around his landing place. It was a small, pleasant room, laden with frost-patterned windows through which Snape could see fields of unmarked snow. A fire blazed in a huge hearth on the far wall. A house elf hurried forward with a glass of amber liquid, which Snape accepted and sipped slowly. The warmth helped combat both the cold he'd encountered when traveling outside Hogwarts to use the Portkey and the nauseated feeling he usually received from that method of travel.

"Welcome, Severus. I am glad that you felt able to come to our home, when you and Lucius recently had such an overwhelming disagreement."

Snape turned and met Narcissa's eyes. The woman wore a long white gown with silver on the bodice and hem, which Snape hazily recognized as the clothing that a Dark witch wore when she wanted a guest to feel comfortable in a potentially hostile place. Snape supposed that was good. He found that he cared little, right now. He always had missed most of the pureblood subtleties, and he wanted to see Harry.

"I came here for my charge," he said. "Where is he?"

"In a room down the hall, Professor Snape," said Draco, and then slipped in through the door across from Snape.

Snape raised his brows. Draco's face was—changed. He looked as though he had been through some shattering experience, both tragedy and triumph, and it had given him a new depth to his eyes. Snape had always thought the boy would probably have one like it, given his pureblood status and his devotion to Harry, but he hadn't expected it to come so soon.

But he dismissed it, because, while the change in Draco was intriguing, the boy had his parents to watch him here, and Harry had had no one until he arrived. "Take me to him," he said.

"In a moment, Severus." Narcissa glided forward and put a hand on his arm. Snape fought not to shake her hand off. He did glare. Narcissa only looked calmly back at him, blue eyes piercing. "I didn't give you specifics in the letter because I didn't know what your reaction would be, but there are things you should know before talking to Harry."

Snape tilted his head and waited. The knot of tension in his belly got worse. It had been present since he received Narcissa's letter, though, and it could wait a moment longer. At least he was in the same house as Harry now, something that he had wished were true since the boy went to Godric's Hollow.

Narcissa took a deep breath. "From what Harry told Draco yesterday—"

Snape deepened his glare. They had Harry here for at least a day and didn't tell me? He would remember that.

"—his mother tried to do something to him," said Narcissa. "We don't know exactly what it was. But, whatever it was, it smashed directly through the shields of blindness about her that he's been maintaining all his life. He used a pureblood justice ritual on her to remove her magic, and then came here."

Snape blinked. For a long moment, he was not sure what surprised him more: that Harry had had the good sense to flee to Malfoy Manor, or that Lily Potter, the woman he had dreamed of destroying quite often in the last few months, was now a Squib, or possibly a Muggle.

"Take me to him," he repeated.

"You must understand." Narcissa's face was implacable. Snape wondered if Harry realized that he had another protector here. Probably not, if he's still in the state he was in when I last saw him. "Harry has acted differently since he arrived here. He's using the dances to maintain his sanity. If you find him excessively formal, don't expect to alter it with a few words." She took a deep breath. "I believe that it is only the particular ritual Harry used, in which he knows that

he can trust the magic's judgment as certain, that is keeping him from breaking. The rituals are the only things he trusts right now."

Snape nodded slowly. That would fit with the boy he had seen leave school. At least Harry could function.

"I still want to see him," he said.

"I know," said Draco, surprising Snape, who had supposed an answer would come from Narcissa. He turned to look at his student, and found Draco's eyes glittering with determination as sharp and cold as the frost on the windowpanes. "Harry's been formal, but it's pathetically obvious that he still thinks he's compelling us into liking him. I want to make sure that he stops that." He tilted his head back, and his hands clenched. "Want to help me?"

Snape smiled. He knew it was not a pleasant smile, because his smiles were never pleasant, but it was the first one he had worn since Narcissa's letter had summoned him. "Lead the way, Draco."

Harry stirred slowly and opened his eyes. He recognized the effects of a sleeping draught in his unusually hazy mind and the way it took him two or three blinks before he could move his head.

He didn't mind. He'd smelled the sleeping draught in the cup of milk Draco had brought him last night, and drunk it anyway. He'd needed rest after a very odd Christmas Day spent with the Malfoys, in which everything was too bright and too sharp-edged, and questions appeared to arrive in his ears after he'd given his answers to them. Narcissa and Draco had allowed him to watch the sunrise with them, which was a tradition they had almost every year, and then to simply sit in the room with them and soak up the warmth while they opened gifts. Harry hadn't seen Lucius at all.

But it was the day after Christmas now, and Harry supposed he would have to face things.

He sat up and picked his glasses up from the table next to the bed. His fingers trembled as he slipped them on. It didn't matter, he told himself sternly. He wasn't in front of anyone pureblooded at the

moment. He didn't need to keep up the façade of strength—and that was really all it was—that made him seem invulnerable.

Then the door opened, and Harry turned his head to see both Draco and Snape entering.

Instantly he was on his guard. Harry studied Snape's face, and saw at least some knowledge there. He was grateful the Malfoys had waited so long before summoning his guardian, and he understood why they had done it; Snape was still the one with legal control over him. But he would have to be very careful not to feel much, not to want much. Otherwise, he stood a huge chance of compelling Snape against both their wills.

"Hello, sir," he said, and watched as they both took up positions in the room—Draco on the foot of the bed where Harry's legs didn't extend, Snape standing beside the bed. Harry waited for Snape to sit down, and then decided he wasn't going to. Harry nodded. He could understand that. Snape would probably want to be able to move, to get his wand up between them, if there was a way that he could fend off Harry's magic with a spell. It looked as though the days away from Harry had done Snape at least a little good. His dark eyes glinted with a hard emotion that was certainly not all the affection Harry had pulled out of him.

"Hello, Harry," Snape said, and his voice was soft enough, but with an edge of steel underneath. Harry relaxed a bit. Are there going to be accusations, then? I can offer my formal apologies, and we can put this behind us.

"We have come to prove to you that your ridiculous suspicions are ridiculous," Snape continued.

Harry blinked. "Sir?" Oh, please, don't let that be what I think it sounds like. I don't think my magic has let his mind go after all...

"You heard me," said Snape. "I made a number of mistakes with you at Hogwarts, and the biggest of those was bowing to your stubborn bloody logic and your insistence that I chose to become your guardian only because you forced me to do so. I am going to prove to

you, Mr. Potter, that it is not so easy to force me to do what I do not want to do.”

Harry shook his head. “With all due respect, sir, you need the time away from me to heal,” he said. “If you only—“

“And I’m going to prove to you that I really do want to be your friend,” Draco cut in, so smoothly that Harry realized they must have talked about this before they came into the room. Well, of course they did, he thought. They’re Slytherins. They would want to have a plan in place ready to strike at my vulnerability. I wonder if they know just how vulnerable they are, themselves?

“You might think you do,” said Harry. “But that doesn’t mean you can convince me.”

“Well, we’re going to,” said Draco, and his face turned a flushed color. Harry retained his calm posture, but he felt a tight little coil of unease open up in his gut. “I don’t think we intend to do the same thing,” Draco went on, and gave Snape a quick glance, “but that doesn’t mean that we’re just going to give you up.”

“I formally request that you give me time to prepare,” said Harry. “Five minutes, in the name of Merlin.” He could strengthen and focus his magic inward in that time, he thought. It was currently curled around him like some sort of enormous snake, lazy and sleepy as he had been before Draco and Snape came in. Five minutes were all Harry would need to tuck it away.

“No,” Draco said.

Harry blinked. “But you know the ritual, Draco,” he said. “I used the exact correct wording.”

“And I don’t have to grant your request,” said Draco. “I’m the heir of the owner of a home who’s given you guest-right. I read about this. The requests a guest makes in the name of Merlin can be refused, unless he makes them of another guest.”

Harry seized that information as swiftly as he could. He had indeed forgotten that particular caveat to the rituals, but there was someone else in the room who didn't have that protection. He looked at Snape. "I formally request that you give me a little time to prepare," he said. "Five minutes, in the name of Merlin."

Snape exchanged a glance with Draco, and Draco nodded. "You have to do as he asks, I'm afraid," he said.

Snape didn't look daunted as he went out the door. Harry didn't understand that. He would have guessed that Snape would look discouraged, as long as he kept up this silly, unreasonable reaction of trying to convince Harry he really hadn't compelled anybody. Snape just looked more determined, the way that Draco did when Harry turned back to him.

"I swore that if you came back broken, I'd put the pieces back together," Draco said, when the door had closed. "Do you remember that?"

"Of course, but—"

"And I'm here," said Draco. "And I am never moving anywhere, Harry."

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I formally apologize for compelling you when I'm a guest in your home," he said. "I thought this might happen when Fawkes brought me here, but I was so broken at that moment that I couldn't think of another sanctuary. I'll apologize to your father and—"

"Compel me."

Harry blinked at him. "What?"

"You think you've already done it," said Draco, his cheeks flushing an intense, angry red. Harry opened his mouth to point out that Narcissa and Lucius would hardly like their only son to display such unattractive emotions, but Draco went right on talking, overriding him. "For two and a half years, you think you've compelled me. And now

you're apologizing for taking peace and safety that you desperately needed, because you think the same thing's happened." Draco's hand slammed on the bed between them, and he leaned forward. "So one more instance of control isn't going to make a difference. Make me do something I don't want to do."

Harry shuddered as fierce loathing twisted around in him. His magic was certainly awake now, hissing unhappily in his ear. Harry kept it from getting out of control by thinking about the ancient pureblood families whose symbols he'd learned during his very earliest childhood, and having the magic make their symbols in a faint line of light behind him. "I can't," he whispered. "Don't ask me that, Draco."

"You don't want to?" Draco's face had flushed further, so that he now looked as though someone had Transfigured his head into an apple.

"Of course not!" Harry shouted, and then winced as the room around them shuddered. "Apologies."

Draco waved a hand, in a gesture so dismissive that he didn't bother completing it. "Then how can you think you compelled my affection for you, you stupid prat? You hate compulsion so much. Would you ever put someone under it willingly?"

"But I put you under it unwittingly," Harry whispered. "Your father said you had changed—I didn't know—"

"Scary as it is for you to comprehend, Harry, there is a little concept called forgiveness," Draco said, his voice cutting. "You chose to forgive your parents and your brother for all the stupid things they'd done, practically forever. And I chose to forgive you for the compulsion when I realized that I didn't know what was real friendship for you and what wasn't. There's no way that I could ever go through books and find all my reactions in them. I'm your friend, and though it may have begun in compulsion, it's continuing with my full knowledge about the risks of being close to you. Yes," he added, before Harry could draw breath, "that includes risking my life."

Harry hadn't been about to say that; he had been about to talk about the future risk to Draco's free will, even if he thought he could choose

right now. But now he shook his head. "No," he said. "You can't possibly forgive me for that."

"Why not?" Draco pushed.

"Because—"

"Because why?"

"Because the desire to forgive me is probably just another compulsion that I induced in you," said Harry, finding the answer and clinging on to it for dear life. "I want your friendship so much that I could convince you to go through this whole charade, just so that I could get you back. I can't ever know what's compulsion and what's not."

"No, Harry, you cannot," said Snape, opening the door and coming right back in. The five minutes must be up, Harry thought, even as he wished that Snape would have stayed away for longer. "But I know my own mind. I am a trained Occlumens, and I have been around powerful wizards who did have a reason to wish to compel my obedience, the Dark Lord and Dumbledore both. I know the touch of compulsion. I know what it feels like on my mind. I have felt none of that from you."

"That probably just means it was too subtle for you to notice," Harry disagreed. His palms were sweating, his magic swirling around him. He could feel himself being backed up against a cliff, and he didn't know what would happen when he felt air beneath his heels. He couldn't think of a pureblood ritual appropriate to handling this. While he had been Lily's victim, they were his, and doing all of this, even wanting to forgive him, because of his influence.

"Harry." Snape's voice all but growled. "Do you think you are a more powerful wizard than Dumbledore?"

"No," said Harry at once. This was a question that he knew the answer to, and since he couldn't think of a reason that he would want Snape to ask it, perhaps it was the first step on a road to freedom, something that had emerged independently from Snape's thoughts.

“What about the Dark Lord?”

Harry shivered as he remembered the feel of the Dark Lord’s magic sliding over him at the end of first year, heavy and potent, able to bind him down and defeat him quite easily. It was only Connor’s innate ability to love that had saved both their lives then. Granted, Harry supposed he might have grown stronger since he’d had the phoenix web unbound, but surely the web would have allowed him to use all the power he had, because he was trying to protect Connor then, and it approved of that purpose. Voldemort had still triumphed over him. And besides, he’d been weakened himself, a disembodied spirit. If Harry could improve in strength as his restraints lessened, surely Voldemort could as well. “No,” he whispered.

“Then why do you believe that you can compel me, when I managed to fight off both their auras?” Snape was glowering at him now.

Harry shook his head frantically. The cliff was behind him, parts of himself spilling out and over into empty air. “No,” he said. “I—I compelled you. I must have.”

“Why?” Snape demanded.

“My mother told me that I can feed on other wizards’ magic,” said Harry. A twig. I can grab and hold to this. “If I drained part of your magic, then that would make you weak enough that I could compel you.”

Snape snorted. “That, also, is an ability that the Dark Lord possessed,” he said. “And I watched him employ it often enough, though at great cost to his own strength for days afterward. No, Mr. Potter, I do not believe that you have done that.”

“I did it to my mother,” Harry said, and her broken form on the floor when the justice ritual had finished with her echoed like a note of discordant music in his mind. Snape and Draco did not hear it, or did not care. They did not back off. They were still pushing him off the cliff.

"You did not." Draco's voice was a vicious snap, a bite that went home as none of Fenrir Greyback's had. "I know the ritual you used, Harry. Mother explained it to me. There is no way it can be mistaken. It would have hurt you if you were wrong. It certainly wouldn't have drained your mother's magic unless she completely deserved it. Mother says that you know that, too, and that you were certain the ritual was right, or you'd have nothing to hold onto."

He's right. I know the ritual is right. I know it couldn't be mistaken.

And that was the shove that sent Harry off the cliff. He closed his eyes intensely, hunched in on himself, and waited to hit the bottom. His thoughts whirled in chaos around him.

Into them, swift as a spear, came Draco's final words.

"That means that she was wrong, Harry. And she was wrong about other things, too. Like your having to compel other people to get them to like you. That's wrong. I'm your friend. Snape's your guardian. She was wrong, Harry."

And Harry couldn't think of anything to refute that. To admit his mother had been right about him in any respect would undercut the justice ritual, and that was right, that was true, that was absolutely correct—

Harry hadn't noticed the contradiction in his logic.

He hadn't let himself, really, and he hadn't been in any fit state to notice it when he first came to the Malfoys.

But here it was, and Harry tried to think of a way around it, and couldn't, before the contradiction swallowed him.

He became aware that he was crying again, and that Draco had his arms around him. Harry clung back. He wasn't falling anymore, but his thoughts and his magic still ran in confused circles.

"I'm here now," Draco whispered. "I suppose you might compel me in the future, or we might learn that something specific is the result of

compulsion. There's always that chance. But for now, I'm here, and I choose to be here, and I am your friend, Harry. I promise."

Harry closed his eyes and hung on, aware for the very first time of how much he really needed this.

Snape watched the scene in silence, as Harry shook in Draco's embrace. His tears had dried up almost as soon as they arrived, but that didn't bother Snape. What amazed him was that they had come at all.

It was not a nice thing at all, what they had done, Snape knew, confronting Harry when he was still vulnerable and acting to drive the truth they wanted him to acknowledge home. On the other hand, had they waited, Snape thought it quite possible that they would never have convinced him. Harry had the greatest ability to heal that Snape had ever known, and Narcissa had said that he was using the pureblood rituals as a channel for his thoughts. Given time, he would have simply grown over the wounds in his being like a sycamore and become a stronger person yet again—but without the ability to forgive himself or listen to his friends. And that would, in the end, have meant another breaking.

This way, building on the one thing Narcissa had said Harry was sure of, they had the chance to truly walk forward.

We are neither of us nice, Snape thought, when Draco finally gently unwound his arms from Harry and nodded to him. I am glad that Draco has this particular kind of unpleasantness within him, however. I will need help with Harry in the future.

He stepped forward and sat down on the bed beside Harry, while Draco slipped out of the room. Snape appreciated that, though he suspected it was courtesy on the surface only and Draco would listen at the door.

Harry kept his head bowed as he whispered, "I'm so sorry for thinking that you didn't know your own mind well enough—"

Snape felt his brows rise in exasperation. He always manages to guilt himself about one thing or another, doesn't he? "Stop that," he said, sharply.

Harry hunched into himself a bit, and waited. He was shivering, Snape noted, though the room wasn't cold.

"I know that you have the ability to compel other wizards, should you wish to," said Snape casually. "And it seems that you might have the ability to drain off other wizards' magic." Now that he thought about it, he believed that Harry had mentioned something like that when describing how Dumbledore tried to attack Draco, but he had not sounded interested in exploring it, and Snape had not pushed. "I assure you I am not eager to be either your victim or your test subject. I will, however, be your teacher in attempts to control both abilities."

Harry looked up for the first time. Snape steeled himself not to simply reach over and embrace the boy. It would comfort Harry, but it would also undermine the seriousness of what he was telling him.

"Had you not thought of getting teaching?" he asked, and made his voice icy. "That is the first sign of genuine carelessness with your magic I have seen from you, then."

Harry shook his head. "I thought Connor could teach me," he whispered. "Since he has the ability to compel other wizards, too."

"And you thought his ability resembled yours?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, hesitantly.

"They are not alike," said Snape. "The compulsion ability your brother possesses, and which Black also does—" he was not able to keep the loathing out of his voice, but luckily, Harry did not react to it"—are specific magical gifts, such as Parseltongue. Your ability to compel other wizards is more properly a side-effect of your magic, which calls to other wizards. Dumbledore has both abilities, as does the Dark Lord. However, you have only the one. If you had the other, I would have seen signs of it when I entered your mind last year."

Harry nodded. Snape had thought the boy understood this already, but he restrained his impatience. It turned out to be amazingly easy. Next to the importance of the victory they had won with Harry today, the small nuances of what he might or might not already know didn't matter.

And perhaps the boy had never been in a mood so receptive to listening, so likely to let words make an impact on his mind. Remembering that, Snape chose his next words carefully.

"Your brother cannot teach you. And, after what happened to Lily, I am not sure he would wish to."

Harry drew in a sharp breath, and his face paled. But he nodded. He had considered, then, what his actions would cost him with the rest of the people who had lived with him (Snape refused to dignify them with the title 'family' anymore). Good. That will make things easier.

"I will teach you," said Snape. "I will teach you whatever you need to know—Occlumency, Legilimency, Potions, Dark Arts. Whatever will preserve your life and insure that you not only survive, but live. You have had enough pain and sorrow in your life, Harry. I assure you, any grudge I bore you because you are James's son died in your first year, and when I came after you at the end of the second, I knew what I risked. I have chosen, again and again, to take the risks." With relief, he noted that Harry was listening to him, this time, and his eyes were steadily widening. "I will not abandon you."

Harry closed his eyes sharply.

Snape, unable to contain the impulse any longer, reached out and drew him close. Harry didn't look up at him as he leaned against him, and Snape was glad for that. He did not think that Harry would have wanted to see the expression on Snape's face.

What Harry has done to Lily is a beginning. But it is not enough. Nothing will satisfy me but her complete obliteration. And he has not touched James, or Black.

It will be my pleasure to insure their destruction.

Harry paused warily at the entrance to the room. He had thought about not coming; the ritual that Lucius had used to request this meeting gave him the chance to refuse. But then things would have been tense, strained, and unhappy in Malfoy Manor for the rest of his stay, and Harry intended that to last until he went back to Hogwarts. He would have to risk the chances of Lucius hurting him.

He thought it was small, anyway. Narcissa and Draco would—well, do something really horrible to Lucius if he hurt Harry. Harry wasn't sure what it would be. He found that he didn't want to think about it. It was enough to know that they were there, their protective presence wrapped around him even when they weren't in the same room, and that Snape was behind them as well. Snape had refused to leave unless Harry came back to Hogwarts with him, and since Draco didn't want that, he had managed to secure an invitation to stay.

Harry still found it hard to believe that they felt affection for him, but he couldn't not believe it. Not anymore. He supposed he would have to get used to it.

"Come in, Mr. Potter."

Lucius straightened up from the hearth, which he'd been poking at—unnecessarily, since the house elves of course kept the fire blazing brightly—and gave him an even look. Harry blinked. He hadn't seen Lucius since he revealed his compulsive ability to him, and neither Narcissa nor Draco had mentioned anything altered about his appearance. He hadn't realized that there was a huge red handprint splayed across Lucius's cheek.

He kept himself from gasping, which would be a break in the dance as well as rude, and inclined his head, going to one of the two chairs. They were the only furniture in the room, and were severe, dark wood and white cloth. Harry knew the colors, paired, meant apology in one of the older silent rituals. He didn't think that was a coincidence.

Lucius took the chair across from him. For a moment, they regarded each other in silence. Harry didn't know what Lucius saw. He saw a pureblood wizard who looked as if he had witnessed a war.

Or was about to witness one, Harry thought, and then shivered. Well, that's true enough.

"Mr. Potter," said Lucius, breaking the silence, "I need to ask you to accept two gifts from me." He gestured, and a white box rose from the floor beside him and skimmed over to Harry. "First, this one."

Harry opened the box gingerly, his magic humming around him; he saw Lucius wince, though he didn't say a word. He had to fight to keep from gaping when he saw what lay inside. It was the truce-gift for the winter solstice, the carved marble branch of an olive tree, token of peace and negotiation continued. It was traditional for the wizards who gave the gift to add some small charm to it, usually one that made the branch shimmer and look alive, in order to show off their power and remind the recipient of the advantages of allying with them.

Lucius had added the dazzling golden aura of a Charm that Harry knew quite well. He'd studied it in-depth in the histories of the First War, though he had never cast it or expected to see it cast. He raised his eyes slowly to Lucius's face.

Lucius confirmed it aloud for him, though he didn't need to. "Break the branch," he said, "and harm will come to me."

"What will break?" Harry asked, hearing his own voice as though down a long tunnel. That hadn't been unusual since he came to the Manor, but this time, the shock wasn't from what he had done to Lily. He looked down at the Charm, but couldn't tell just from looking. "Your arm, or your leg?"

Lucius bared his teeth in a very faint smile. Harry thought it was directed more against himself than Harry. "My neck."

Harry gently picked up the branch, and saw Lucius shudder along the connection that bound him to it. "You've given me a weapon against you in the case of treachery," he said, hearing the wonder in his voice.

Lucius snorted. "I would have not used that Charm otherwise, Potter."

Harry looked carefully at him. He wouldn't have trusted protestations of sorrow, of course, or simple apologies, and Lucius knew that. It seemed that when he decided to yield, he did not do it halfway.

Of course, he'd just stepped the truce-dance up. Harry would have to think of a gift that was a fit answer to this one, and that meant, properly, making himself just as vulnerable.

Harry put the branch back in the box, and then nodded. "And the second gift, Mr. Malfoy?"

Lucius gestured again, probably performing a nonverbal spell rather than doing wandless magic, and a second box rose from behind him. This one opened on the way to Harry, so that he could see a glass vial nestled within it. The vial contained a tiny amount of dark liquid. When he could see it closely, Harry realized it was blood.

He met Lucius's eyes. "And this?"

"Three drops of my blood," said Lucius. "I gave three drops to those trying to resurrect the Dark Lord, when they threatened Draco. They used it to determine my true intentions." He paused, and bowed his head slightly, in such a motion that his chin shielded his throat. "I thought it only appropriate," he added softly, "to give three drops of blood to the one who saved my son's life."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter. Do you accept my apologies?"

Harry held himself back from the immediate answer he wanted to make. This was not about Draco or Narcissa, however large a part they might play in Lucius's decision to yield to him. He had to consider, rationally, logically, coolly, whether or not he trusted Lucius not to hurt him.

And he did, he realized, a little surprised. The branch secured his trust. So did the three drops of blood.

And so did the knowledge, clear in Lucius's eyes as they squinted against the headache Harry's magic was giving him, that he could

utterly destroy Lucius, branch or no branch, if Lucius ever betrayed him. He was stronger than Lucius was. The pureblood rituals were a way of acknowledging that power without coming to blows, and letting everyone preserve their pride. That was their oldest and most sacred purpose.

"I accept them," said Harry quietly.

Lucius gave a small, feral smile. Harry gave back one he suspected resembled it a great deal. What he and Lucius had was nothing like the friendship Harry had with Draco, nor the perhaps-friendship, perhaps-parental bond he had with Narcissa, but it was an understanding nonetheless.

January 2nd, 1994

Harry Potter:

Have Severus bring you to school at once. I know he is there with you.

Your mother has been stripped of magic, and your father has left Godric's Hollow without telling anyone where he has gone. Your brother is beside himself, and Sirius is not much better. Remus returns my letters to me unopened.

It is time that you and I talked.

Albus Dumbledore.

Chapter Twenty-Five: I Have Been a Brother to Wolves

“Are you sure?”

Harry quirked his lips in a smile. Nervous as he was, he thought that Draco was having a worse time of it, with the way that he kept asking Harry if he was sure, if he was ready. “I’m sure. And you’ll be there for the start of term soon, so it’s not like we’re going to be separated for a long period of time.”

Draco frowned at him. “I just don’t understand why you won’t let me come with you right now, but you’ll let Snape.” He had moved slightly, as though to shield Harry with his body from the fireplace they were about to Floo through. They were in the antechamber that Snape had entered last week, and to hear Snape tell it, there was no change except that the frost on the windows was heavier.

“Because Dumbledore can’t manipulate him as easily,” said Harry, and waited serenely while Draco sputtered through his protest. When he’d finished, Harry went on. “You try, Draco, but you’re not quite as experienced at manipulation yet. And anyway, you’re learning the pureblood dances. Dumbledore won’t keep to them. He knows that he can’t challenge me on that ground, not with the ritual I performed on my mother. He’s going to try different tricks instead.”

“Like what?” Draco insisted, folding his arms.

Harry shrugged. “Emotional blackmail, I think. Probably also something legal, even though he can’t actually have the Ministry arrest me for turning my mother into a Muggle.”

“I want to hurt him,” said Draco.

“And that is why you can’t go yet,” said Harry gently. “I promise, Draco, we’ll see each other in a short time, and I’ll have Professor Snape with me. Don’t you trust him to take care of me?”

“Not in the same way,” said Draco, and stamped his foot, and turned his back so that he could stare into the fireplace and sulk. Then,

abruptly, he lifted his head and turned around again. “I never did give you a Christmas gift!” he exclaimed.

“Then you can give it to me when you get back to school,” said Harry.

“And where’s my gift?” Draco was scowling at him.

“At school,” said Harry. “I wanted to give it to you in person.”

Draco smiled at him and might have said something else, but Snape swept into the room then, and nodded to Harry. “Since the Headmaster requested our presence so precipitously,” he said, “I feel it would not be wise to disappoint him.”

“Of course not, sir,” Harry agreed, and stepped forward. Snape was tense beside him. Harry wasn’t surprised. He was tense, too, in spite of all his reassurances to Draco about everything being fine.

But he wasn’t going to get much chance not to be tense. He would have to plunge ahead and do whatever he could to survive and win. It was the same mindset that had kept him alive through the battle at the end of the first year with Voldemort, when he was already writhing under the Crucio spell. It hurt, of course it hurt, but so? He was marching into war. That always hurt.

At least my mother trained me well to face my enemies, he thought, and then tried not to think about it, because he didn’t like thinking about the Muggle who had borne him if he could help it.

Snape took a pinch of Floo powder from the mantle, gripped Harry’s shoulder for a moment, and then tossed the powder into the flames. “Hogwarts!” he called out, as the fire turned green, and plunged in.

Harry stayed a moment to embrace Draco, who appeared abruptly nervy about letting him go, and tried to say something. But Harry didn’t stay long enough to hear what it was. He was afraid that it might break through the fragile shields that he was already building around himself.

“Mr. Potter, Severus. Please do come in.”

Harry lifted his head and stepped into the office with Snape just behind him, at his right shoulder. Dumbledore was no longer using his first name, then. Harry thought it a kind of honesty, setting up the battlefield ahead. He wouldn't try for the grandfatherly persona any more.

Of course, his eyes fixed on Harry were bright with disgust and rage, and Harry knew that honesty was not the same thing as lying down and giving up.

"Sit down, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore sharply. He gestured to the two chairs in front of the desk.

"I would prefer to remain standing, thank you," said Harry. His voice emerged from his lips, perfectly practiced and cold. He felt Snape give a small tremor of surprise, but Dumbledore's eyes only narrowed further.

"I would like us to be equals for this discussion, Mr. Potter," he said.

"Then take your seat first."

Snape drew breath as if to say something, but let it go into silence. Harry was sure Snape would have admonished him to be more careful, not to face the Headmaster so bluntly. Slytherin cunning was called for, he would have said, not Gryffindor rashness.

But Harry did not care. He knew he wasn't up to the usual delicate, indirect way he and Dumbledore approached each other, not with the state his mind was in. Besides, delicate and indirect hadn't worked in the past. They had set up a truce, and Dumbledore had begun at once to undermine it with things like his messages to the Ministry. Harry had countered in the same subtle way, and Dumbledore still had not stopped. More than anything else, Harry wanted him stopped.

He didn't think for one moment he could actually persuade the Headmaster to stop interfering in his life. What he would do was refuse to play as many of the games as he could. This was a battle. He wouldn't let Dumbledore pretend it wasn't anymore. He would

treat the Headmaster much as he would Lucius, save that he actually trusted Lucius more.

Dumbledore slowly sat down behind the desk. Harry at once made his way to the nearest chair. It was set just high enough from the floor that he would have to climb up onto it like a child and sit with his legs dangling.

Harry let his magic out in a brief, controlled snap. The chair shrank until it was more nearly suited to a thirteen-year-old's height. He took his seat and met Dumbledore's eyes. Yes, there was fear there, and uncertainty, and something that Harry didn't think was quite seething hatred, but could become it very easily.

Good. If I'm unnerved, he should be, too.

"I have received word about what you have done," Dumbledore began, the words sharp as a slap. He'd obviously recognized at least some of the tactics Harry was using, and tried to adapt them to his own advantage.

"You told me that in the letter, Headmaster," said Harry. "However, your wording was interesting. You said that my mother had been stripped of her magic. Does that mean that you do not realize what in fact happened?" He kept his face innocent and unstrained, and felt Snape quiver in his own seat, this time with laughter. Harry felt his own rueful amusement, distantly. It seemed he could not quite stop being Slytherin altogether.

"I know that you called on a misplaced ritual to strip her of her magic," said Dumbledore. "A vengeance ritual."

"A justice ritual, Headmaster," said Harry. "I used the Potter reparations box, and put her magic within it. I would have lost my power instead, if I had called for the box and it really was only vengeance." He knew his voice rang with steel. He didn't care. Dumbledore was an idiot, if he really thought that he was going to make Harry doubt the ritual he had used, and which was the core of the fragile certainty that Harry knew passed for his mind right now.

"I am not speaking of its intention," said Dumbledore, leaning forward. "I am speaking of its effects. You know that you have deprived your mother of every chance of a normal life? I have seen her. She is a Muggle, with not the smallest bit of magic left to her. How do you think she will feel now, surrounded day in and day out by people who have powers she can never exercise again? The punishment was too harsh, Harry."

Harry steeled his heart. He could see the broken figure on the floor if he looked into his mind's eye. He was not looking into it. "I would never have expected you to say that Muggles didn't have normal lives, Headmaster. After all, you've spent your entire life preaching the virtues of protecting them, of regarding them as people just like wizards. 'Only our talents are different,' goes a quote from one of your most famous speeches. 'Our souls are the same.'" He could quote that speech flawlessly. He could quote the whole thing flawlessly, if Dumbledore asked for it. There were advantages to being made to study and memorize history books since he could read. "Lily Potter is not less than she ever was. How dare you say that she is?"

Snape was most definitely trying not to laugh now. Dumbledore leaned forward further, his face gone grave and disappointed. "For one who has been magical, Harry, the loss is still a severe blow," he said. "You must realize that."

"And what about the blows that she has given me, Headmaster?" Harry let his voice rise. Let him think I'm on the verge of losing control. Dumbledore should really watch his magic instead of the visible indicators of voice and face, and for the moment, his magic lay quiescent around him. "The way she trained me. The phoenix web. The way that she tried to put the phoenix web on me again, after making me believe that I might have a family and that she understood what she had done wrong." Snape jerked. Harry ignored him. Yes, he hadn't told either Snape or the Malfoys about what exactly Lily had done to make him so angry, but that was because he didn't have a reason to relive it with them. With Dumbledore, he did. The Headmaster's eyes were wide with shock. Harry laughed, and knew the sound was harsh, and did not care. "You should never have advised her to do that, Headmaster. Of course I resisted it. It was the

one thing that could have made me angry enough to use the justice ritual. I am never going to be bound again. Never.”

The Headmaster looked old, and supremely tired. “Harry,” he murmured. “Do you realize what will happen if your magic is not bound?”

Harry raised his eyebrows mockingly at him. “You think that I’ll turn into the next Dark Lord?”

“I don’t think it, Harry. I know it, given where your power comes from.” Dumbledore seemed to age before his eyes. “Your mother must have told you about the talent that you possess to feed on the magic of other wizards. That is an inherently evil thing.”

“What, like Parseltongue?” Harry asked. “I don’t think so, Headmaster. I know the difference between Light and Dark magic now, since I’ve been under the phoenix web. I don’t think that the ability to speak with snakes is Dark, and I don’t believe that I’ll go evil just because my magic is free.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “You are still going to endanger other students, my dear boy. I cannot let you attend Hogwarts with your magic unchecked.”

Harry ground his teeth. He had to admit, he hadn’t seen that coming. But he thought he could still respond. “I am getting it checked,” he said. “Professor Snape has graciously agreed to train me, and to stop my abilities from harming other wizards. He is a trained Occlumens. He can tell me when I am impinging on his thoughts and his magic. And he has served two Lords,” he couldn’t help adding. “He’ll know what would happen to make me become one, and prevent that from happening.”

He glanced at Snape for the first time since they had entered the office, and saw the watchful dark eyes fixed on his face. Snape nodded once. Harry was glad. Now it wouldn’t really matter if his will faltered a bit, or if he felt like giving up on the path because it was too hard. Snape would be there, pushing him forward, and once Snape had decided something, he didn’t yield.

"That is a problem," said Dumbledore, his voice barely a breath. "That Severus has served two Lords, I mean. If it were more widely-known...if it were confirmed that he still bears the Dark Mark, for example..."

Harry sat straight up and met Dumbledore's eyes. He is threatening a person I care about. His magic trembled, wanting to be unleashed, but this wasn't a problem that could be solved with magic.

Up the stakes. Since he only seems to understand how poisonous these blades are when they're pointed back against him, I'll just do that.

"That would be a shame," said Harry casually. "Since losing Professor Snape would make you lose Professor Black, too, and where would you find competent wizards to cover both positions?"

Dumbledore's face went white.

"I am tired of this," said Harry, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's. "You must know by now that I won't give up. And yet you keep threatening to sack Professor Snape, as if that will make me bow. I'm not going to bow. Threaten my guardian, and I'll threaten the man you sent Peter to Azkaban for."

Dumbledore was shaking his head from side to side. Harry couldn't tell whether the shock and sorrow he wore now were real or feigned. "Harry, he is your godfather," he murmured.

"He doesn't deserve the title," Harry snarled, and was startled to hear himself say the words even as they passed his lips. He hadn't realized this kind of rage was under the surface, hot and boiling, so unlike the cold rage he'd used to enact the justice ritual. "He's helped Connor more than me this year. He doubted me last year. He's lied to me about everything important in his life. You made Peter into a sacrifice for him just like you made me into a sacrifice for Connor. I don't want to protect him anymore, Professor." He clenched his fingers in front of him. "I would prefer not to take this public, Headmaster, but I will if you force Professor Snape's past into the

open. The moment everyone hears about the ex-Death Eater working at Hogwarts, everyone is going to hear about the insane Professor Black with a Dark talent and a fondness for trying to kill his godson working at Hogwarts—the one who was spared death or Azkaban because you persuaded someone else to go to prison in his stead.” He paused delicately. “Indeed, some people already know.” He was sure that that was what Starborn’s letter had been referring to, when he had written that Harry should ask what had spared Sirius Azkaban.

Dumbledore remained silent for long moments. Harry met his eyes directly. He could feel the probing light of Legilimency, but it bounced straight off his Occlumency shields.

Behind those shields, Harry knew, he was terribly vulnerable. But he had come prepared for nearly everything that Dumbledore threw at him so far. He was going to continue to do so. He was going to continue to attend Hogwarts, and he was going to continue to have Snape as his guardian.

“Do you think anyone would believe you?” Dumbledore asked at last. His voice was emotionless.

“I’m sure that Rita Skeeter would be happy to,” Harry said coldly. “She seems rather fascinated with me.”

Dumbledore nodded, once, twice, and then said, “Very well, Harry. You may continue to attend Hogwarts, and Professor Snape may continue to work here.” He turned and opened one of the boxes on a shelf behind him, pulling out a sheaf of papers. “However, I am afraid that he can no longer continue to be your guardian.”

“No?” Harry asked through numb lips.

“No.” Dumbledore spread the papers on his desk. “You see, with the Dark spell your parents were under gone—on both their minds—there is no longer any reason to keep you from them. The Ministry agreed to give custody of you to Severus Snape for only as long as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was investigating your parents. Now that the spell is gone, you can return to them.” He shot Harry a narrow-eyed glance, coupled with a bright smile. “Unless you

can provide some reason that you should stay away from them, of course.”

Harry clenched his fists. The bastard. Oh, he could tell the Ministry the truth easily enough—but that would mean letting everyone know what his mother had done to him, dragging the whole mess up again. Harry wanted it done with. The ritual had been all the justice he intended to take. He wouldn’t see his family vilified and crucified in front of the horrified and morbidly curious wizarding world. He was done with Lily. He would leave it up to James, Sirius, and Remus to confront him on their own terms. And he was Connor’s brother now and forever. Connor didn’t deserve to be in front of the media circus that would result.

“Harry,” Snape hissed. “They should know. I am willing to go to any lengths to stay as your guardian, and if that means telling the Ministry—”

Someone rapped smartly on the door of the office. Dumbledore smiled. “Ah,” he said. “That should be the Ministry representative I asked to join us, bringing the papers to transfer your guardianship back to your parents, Harry. You will have to choose, in a moment, between truth and lies. Choose well.” He sat back behind his desk and beamed as the door swung in.

Harry, frozen, saw Dumbledore’s smile disappear in the same moment as a smooth voice said, “Terribly sorry for the delay, Albus, old boy. But I’m afraid there’s been a bit of a problem with the paperwork.”

Harry turned, disbelieving, joyous, to see Rufus Scrimgeour standing in the doorway. His apologetic expression was nearly perfect, except for the light in his eyes, which were fixed on Dumbledore. He never acknowledged Harry as he limped forward and laid the handful of papers he held carefully on the Headmaster’s desk. He didn’t need to, Harry thought. He could see the essence of the Auror’s plan from here.

Oh, beautifully done, sir, he thought, with the same admiration with which he'd read about Dark families' outmaneuvering each other in the past. Oh, wonderfully done.

He was absolutely sure, even before Dumbledore began to shift through the papers, that this was all perfectly legal. Scrimgeour wouldn't have it otherwise. He watched Dumbledore with patient earnestness as he looked through the pieces of parchment, and nodded when the Headmaster stared at him.

"Yes, Albus, I'm sorry," he said, with oceans of regret in his voice. "But you know that we can't make an exception to the proper procedure even for you." He managed to say that without any emphasis at all. Harry was beyond impressed. "All the forms have to be completed absolutely properly, and in triplicate. We received only one copy of each, and most of the vital information was missing." Scrimgeour shrugged. "I'm sure it will be set right eventually. No doubt it was a mistake somewhere along the line. But, in the meantime, I'll have to ask you to complete the forms again."

He paused, then drew a final sheet of parchment out of his cloak and laid it carefully, carefully, down in the center of the table. "And this," he said. "It's the results of the exam that we had Lily Potter take, just to be absolutely sure that she'd returned to normal. I'm not sure what happened, Albus, really. Probably she was just having a bad day, the poor girl. It's not every day that one recovers from a Dark spell on one's mind. But until we can see some sign that she has her normal magic back, I'm afraid that we can't release young Harry here into her custody. She might have erratic power and hurt him, after all. And I'm sure none of us want the boy with a guardian who would hurt him."

Dumbledore had been absolutely stopped. Harry wanted very, very badly to laugh, but he managed to lower his head and clap a hand over his mouth, making soft snorting noises instead. Scrimgeour gave him a mild glance, as much as to say that he didn't know what Harry found so funny in all this deadly serious business. Snape was leaning back in his chair, his eyes glinting as they fixed on Scrimgeour.

"I will insure that the forms are completed properly, Auror Scrimgeour," said Dumbledore, and swept up all the papers. His

stopping had lasted only a few moments, Harry saw. He would find a way past it. But at least he wasn't saying that Harry had to return to his parents right now; for that alone, Harry thought, he owed a debt to Scrimgeour.

"See that you do, Albus." Scrimgeour wagged one finger. "There's nothing more important than properly completed paperwork, especially in a case like this." He turned and moved towards the door, giving a final glance at Harry and Snape. "Are you coming?" he asked. "I would like to have one more interview with young Mr. Potter here, to insure that he's been treated right."

"Of course," Dumbledore had no choice but to say, though he watched Harry with fierce eyes.

Harry smiled amiably at him. So things hadn't been settled permanently, not yet, but he supposed he had been a fool to think they would be. At least he was able to walk out of the office without more vicious mental wounds, and with an idea of what tactics Dumbledore would try now. He would count it a victory.

"Of course, Auror Scrimgeour," he said, and stood. Snape moved very close to his side. Harry was glad. He didn't entirely trust Dumbledore not to throw a curse at his back. Merlin, he didn't trust Dumbledore to do anything but try to control him and protect Sirius.

As they rode down the moving staircase, Harry looked up at Scrimgeour and said, "Thank you, sir."

"He was mucking about in my Ministry," Scrimgeour explained peacefully. "You don't muck about in my Ministry. You just don't." He paused, and shook his head. "Besides, imagine trying to transfer custody of a child from one guardian to another when all the forms hadn't been properly completed. It's a terrible thing. Keeps me awake at nights."

Someone knocked on the door of Snape's office that night. Harry paused and looked up at Snape, who only shook his head back. He wasn't expecting a visitor, then. Harry palmed his wand and strode cautiously forward. He supposed it might only be Draco, whom he'd

seen at the Feast that night but had to leave because Draco had left all his homework until the last moment, but it was better to be safe.

When he opened the door, he blinked. Remus stood there, shivering slightly, as though he'd been caught in a heavy rain. The amber eyes he turned to Harry's face shone with desperation.

"What do you want, werewolf?" Snape snapped from behind Harry. A glance back showed that his wand was most definitely pointing at Remus, and he looked inclined to hex first and ask questions later.

"I want my memories back," said Remus softly.

"I know the ritual that you did to Lily," Remus explained, for the third time, at Snape's insistence. "My father told me about it. And I know that it can't be wrong." He clenched his hands in front of him. They were shaking. "Harry," he said, "I have to know, now. I thought it would be better never to know, to just leave Lily as the good woman I imagined her to be. And now I found out that it—isn't. I can't stand knowing that she did something wrong, and no details about what it was. Please, please, let me past the barrier. Let me see. Let me know."

"It's not that simple, Lupin," Snape began, his lip curled. He'd let Remus in to sit on a sofa Transfigured from a bookshelf, which Harry knew was generous by Snape's standards, but refused to take a seat of his own. He'd been pacing around the room during the three explanations. Now he whirled, robes flying behind him as he stabbed his wand at Remus again. "You know that an Obliviate is Dark magic by at least one standard. It clamps down on your free will, and prevents you from looking at one set of memories you should have access to. The safest way is to have Dumbledore remove it, and you know that he will not."

"There's another way," said Remus. "And I would never have suggested this if I didn't think it would work." He turned and faced Harry, who sat on a Transfigured chair across from him. "Harry," he said quietly. "I felt you, in my mind, that night we went running in the Forbidden Forest—"

“What?” Snape said, in a voice that promised death and pain if he wasn’t told about this immediately. Harry ignored him, because this was more important.

“And when you released your magic at the Quidditch game,” Remus went on, undaunted. “I know what you are.” He took a deep breath, and let it out again. He seemed to grow larger as he did so. Harry saw his eyes blaze amber, and the air around him stirred with the smell of musk. The sudden wild atmosphere to the room made Harry’s nerves tingle. “Vates,” Remus breathed.

Harry nodded slowly. After the ride with Fawkes, he could hardly deny it. But— “I don’t know everything about what that word means, Remus,” he said. “I could still hurt you.”

“I know what it means,” Remus whispered. “Not everything, but what it means for me. The unbinder, Harry, someone who opens. You couldn’t touch my mind and free me from the Obliviate if I were an ordinary human. But the werewolf in me knows you.” He smiled faintly. “Even if it doesn’t like you very much.”

“Wait a minute—“ Snape began.

Harry stood up. His magic swirled around him, and he brought it forward so that it pointed at Remus. “You know that I’m going to have to enter your mind?” he asked, and Remus nodded.

“Wait a minute—“ Snape said again.

“Good,” said Harry. “Just checking.” And he leaned forward and opened his eyes and his magic in the way that he had just after he’d ridden with Fawkes.

An absolute maze of webs sprang into being around him, worked through the stones of Hogwarts and into the very earth. Harry could see the bindings on the house elves if he looked, probably the most prominent ones, and a net spread over the Forbidden Forest, and the icy, curling blue strands that reached out from Hogwarts’s grounds towards Azkaban and tied the Dementors to their duty.

But, at the moment, he was only interested in one set of them. He focused his mind on Remus, and saw the man as a shimmering form, surrounding two webs. One was small and red, and held back a specific set of memories in which Harry saw his own face.

He tensed himself, and reached out to that web.

Immediately, the other one attacked him. It was old, and dark, and wound into every part of Remus's being—body for the transformation, mind for the bestial rage that was a werewolf in the killing mood, emotions for the way it heightened all of them, spirit for the pall it cast over Remus's life, and magic for the way it made Remus able to pass the curse on to others. It fell on Harry like a crushing weight, heavy and black, snarling in his ear and drooling liquid so warm it might have been blood.

Harry held himself firm. The werewolf was recognizing him even as it tried to keep him out. It itself was a magical creature, and in the grip of a human mind or one calmed by Wolfsbane, it had to listen to the rumors of power Harry carried with him—that and his hatred of compulsion, Harry suspected. Only when it went absolutely mad with fury during the transformation was it free of the need to listen. Harry knew, then, why he hadn't been able to make Fenrir Greyback recognize him.

"I hate you."

Harry's hair stood on end, and he swallowed several times before he could reply. It was unnerving to realize that the disease had a voice. "I know," he said. "It doesn't matter. I want to take off the Obliviate. I want to free a part of you that's been tied up. That should lessen your hatred of me, shouldn't it?"

"You like him," said the disease.

"Who?" Harry asked, at a loss.

"The one I ride." The web flexed its claws, and Harry dimly heard Remus cry out. The wolf was trying to wake. "My victim. Mine. I hate him, too."

Harry shuddered, and because he was in Remus's mind, a storm of memories flitted past his eyes. He realized fully what it meant when Remus had said he was a werewolf, not a wolf. This wasn't a wild creature Harry could speak with as he had with the Runespoors or centaurs, not even a Dark creature open to bargaining, as the Dementors were. This was a Dark creature who lived to compel others. It hated Remus, and it was alive in him, and it would torment him until he was dead, for no better reason than the pleasure of making him obey its will.

Harry felt his own hatred of compulsion rise in response. He bared his teeth. "Someday," he promised, "I am going to destroy you."

"Can't. Won't." The disease laughed at him, a sound that Harry felt like fever in every fiber of his being. "Too weak of will. And I hate you. I catch and torture what I hate. Always." Harry had the sensation of teeth snapping past his ear. "You, and the other one in here, the one my steed calls Severus. I'll have him yet."

Later, Harry considered that perhaps he ought to have reacted to the threat more rationally. But he hated it when people threatened those he loved. He didn't understand why his enemies kept doing it.

He reached out and pulled Remus's Obliviate apart.

Remus's mind bucked, twisting, trying to shatter in the face of the suddenly released memories and the disease's pushing. Harry wrapped his magic around it and held on. He kept breathing gusts of free will across it, wanting Remus to do as he wanted, not as Dumbledore or the werewolf in him wanted. Harry bent all his will to that task, feeling himself slip to the ground. He heard Snape yelling "Ennervate!" but he didn't respond to the pull back to his own body. He had to do this. He hated webs so much. He wanted the one web he thought he could remove at the time gone.

If I have this power for a reason, this is the reason, he thought, and shoved, and shoved hard, at the pressures threatening to break Remus's mind apart. Where they wouldn't yield, or Remus couldn't respond fast enough to deal with them, Harry took them on himself.

He felt his shields give way, felt the webs of his mind unraveling, and hung on there, too. He had to stay sane, because Draco and Snape wanted him sane, and because the justice ritual had been right. He didn't have anyone's permission to go insane, including his own, because, at the moment, that would mean the same thing as doubting the ritual.

The storm at last finished. Harry opened his eyes and found himself lying on the floor in Snape's office. He looked up, blinking, turning towards Remus, but Snape's face got in the way first.

"If you ever do that again," Snape hissed, one hand clutching at Harry's shoulder, "then I am going to kill you, discover magic that will allow me to resurrect the dead, and use it to bring you back to life so that I can kill you again."

"Remus's werewolf threatened you," said Harry, still trying to sit up. "It shouldn't have done that." His head was aching ferociously, and he couldn't see more than a few feet. He could make out that the Transfigured couch was empty, though. "Where's Remus?" he added.

"The beast ran out of here," said Snape in disgust. "He said something about finding Black."

Harry felt his eyes widen as he remembered what Remus had told him about being suddenly released from the Obliviate. I know that there would be no going back once I learned what they did to you. And it would be because of me, not them. They may have done unforgivable things, but I would do unforgivable things, too, in my anger.

And...

I'm not rational when I'm in a rage, Harry. I've been tempted to bite people before.

This soon after the full moon, and with the rage and the werewolf rising up in him, Remus might even bite Sirius, and succeed in giving him the curse.

“Oh, Merlin,” Harry said, and managed to stand and turn towards the door. “We’ve got to stop him.”

“Why?” Snape asked, curling his fingers in his collar. “I would much rather stay here and listen to you tell me the stories of your trips to the Forbidden Forest.”

“He’s going to make Sirius a werewolf!” Harry yelled, trying to twist out of Snape’s grasp. It was hard when his head and mind still trembled with pain, and even his magic felt exhausted.

“Why didn’t you say so?” Snape let him go and strode towards the door. “I want to watch.”

Chapter Twenty-Six: Lady Lioness

She had most often believed in the past that if she wanted something done right, she would have to do it herself.

Or get Albus Dumbledore to do it. But since he had grown so untrustworthy of late, Minerva had once more become used to relying on herself.

And one of the things she had to do, which no one else seemed willing to do, was tell Connor Potter exactly what had happened to his mother. Albus had told her at once when he received Lily's letter, which was good of him. Of course, he probably wanted her to use the information to manipulate Connor against his brother in some unimaginable and obscure way. Minerva had decided to counteract that by using the information in as straightforward a manner as possible.

She rapped on the door to Sirius Black's office on the second floor, and then repeated the motion when no one answered. Sirius had brought Connor in just a few hours ago on his flying motorbike. Minerva had asked one of the house elves to watch over the room for her, and knew they were in here.

At last, slowly, Sirius opened the door. Minerva bit back a curse. His eyes were...

She shook her head and stepped past him. She knew why his eyes were like that, and since the memories asking would bring up were even more painful, she would not ask. "I came to talk to Connor," she said softly.

Sirius nodded and motioned a hand over his shoulder. Minerva turned and saw the Boy-Who-Lived in a chair beneath one of the Gryffindor Quidditch banners that Sirius kept hung all over the room, his head buried in his hands.

Minerva approached him as calmly as she could. She had seen Connor when he was in a temper, especially when he was in a temper about something his brother had done. He needed serene

adults around him, adults who could tell him the truth and make sure he understood it while retaining an undertone of stern sympathy. Had she had the choice, Minerva would not have left him alone with Sirius so long, but he was far closer to the boy than she was. She had wanted to give them some privacy.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, taking a chair across from him. He hadn’t stirred when she stood over him. Perhaps this would encourage him to open up to her more. “I want to speak with you about your mother.”

Connor dropped his hands from his face at that and looked up at her, and Minerva bit back on more obscenities, which was something she normally never had to do once in a day, never mind twice. Connor’s eyes looked like holes in his face, as though someone had scooped all the soul out of them and left dim hazel tunnels into his skull.

“I already know,” said Connor flatly. “She talked to me, and Sirius talked to me.” He drew in a ragged breath, and then barked like Sirius in dog form. “Harry stole her magic! He stole her magic, and left her a Muggle! How could he have done that! He hates her, that’s obvious, and I hate him!”

Minerva’s eyes widened, and she turned to stare at Sirius. Even if Lily hadn’t recognized the pureblood ritual—and Minerva considered it one of the unmistakable ones—then why hadn’t Sirius, who had certainly been raised in a pureblood household and might even have seen that ritual in action, told him the truth?

Sirius hunched and avoided her gaze.

“I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!” Connor was repeating passionately when Minerva looked at him again. His eyes had brightened, but only to fill with the emotion that he was describing, something Minerva thought no child so young should feel. “I want him dead. I don’t want him near me. Can you arrange things so that we don’t have Potions or Transfiguration with the Slytherins any more?” He looked up, seeking sympathy in Minerva’s eyes. “Because Sirius was right all along, and that’s all he is, really, just a dirty, nasty, slimy, sneaking—“

The door to the office burst open then, and in came Remus Lupin.

But it was a Remus Lupin horribly changed. Minerva didn't think she'd seen him look worse since the sole transformation she'd witnessed for herself when he was a student here. His face was flushed with too much color, and his hands choked the air in front of him. The deep, wild smell that accompanied him made Minerva's nose twitch as if she were already in cat form.

And he aimed straight at Sirius and knocked him to the floor, his jaws—Minerva couldn't think of them as part of a human mouth any more—snapping at his face.

Connor was screaming. Minerva rose and aimed her wand, casting coolly.

“Petrificus Totalus!”

The spell hit Remus and simply faded. Minerva hissed. She forgot, not having fought them often, that werewolves were resistant to many kinds of magic, and immune to some of them.

But that was only supposed to be in animal form.

Swift as despair came the next thought: Does that mean that he could pass on the curse to Sirius if he bit him now?

Minerva would not allow that to happen. It would mean a fate worse than death for one of her Gryffindors, and death or life in Azkaban for the other, and she had already lost enough of them during the holidays.

She gathered up more of her power and poured it smoothly into the next spell she used, one that the witches of the McGonagall family had passed down among themselves since Calypso invented it. It had been one of the techniques that the Light Lady had used to control herself.

“Catena cordis!”

It worked, as she had hoped it would. Werewolves had been around long enough to develop more immunity to general spells than specialized ones. Just as Remus opened his mouth and lunged at Sirius's face, he gasped. Then he fell awkwardly to the side, his arms and legs moving as though he struggled against a net. Minerva watched him in pity. The effect of the spell wasn't pleasant, as all the emotions in the victim's heart abruptly jerked sideways, chained and kept from becoming true emotions. He would have to think rationally. He wouldn't have a choice.

Minerva decided that she could do worse than use the spell on the others in the room, and had just lifted her wand to do so, when the door banged the rest of the way open and Harry and Severus lunged in. Harry was gasping, panting, his face flushed as though with fever. Severus was looking at Remus, and the expression he wore was undeniably disappointed.

Minerva opened her mouth to ask what was going on, and then Connor took the matter at least partly out of her hands.

"I hate you, Harry!"

Harry winced and closed his eyes, turning his head so that his chin rested on his shoulder. He supposed he should have expected his twin's declaration, but it still hurt.

What hurt even more was Connor's awkward punch to his jaw a moment later. Harry wouldn't have believed his brother could cross the room that fast, nor that he wouldn't have heard him coming. He supposed his own emotional pain had distracted him.

He rolled with the blow—one thing he had learned in his long training with the Muggle who had given birth to him was how to fall—and lunged back to his feet, only to find Snape's wand pointed at his brother, and McGonagall's wand pointed at Snape, and Connor's wand pointed at him.

"You hurt our mother!" Connor had obviously been crying not too long ago, but now his eyes were dry with rage like a desert sun. "How could you do that? How could you take her magic away?" He

steadied his wand with his left hand as it began to shake. “Maybe you’d like it if I did that to you, so that you can pay for it?”

Harry felt the remnants of his sanity begin to slip again. He scrambled after them and grasped them all, holding them firmly in place. No, he would not allow himself to doubt the justice ritual. He could not.

“Shut up, Mr. Potter.”

Harry went cold all over. He had never heard Snape sound so hateful. He turned slowly to look at his guardian again, and saw that Snape’s face had closed down. What Harry recognized was the same look he had given Sirius on the Quidditch Pitch. They had a Death Eater in the room with them.

“No, don’t,” he whispered. “Sir. Please.”

“He practically killed our mother!” Connor howled back at Snape, not at all intimidated. “She told me so herself. I saw her. He didn’t, he ran away, he was too cowardly to stay, but—“

Harry stared at him with horrified sickness rising up in his belly. Of course. He should have anticipated that this would happen. He had left Connor alone with Lily and Sirius, at least, and maybe James, for too long a period of time. Of course they would make his brother believe what they wanted him to believe, and that Harry had taken away her magic as the result of Dark spells, or perhaps the obscene feeding ability that Lily had talked about.

Snape’s hand came down on his shoulder just as the room started to swirl, and Snape’s low voice said into his ear, “I will not have you fainting. Do you understand? You will not.”

That sternness gave Harry an anchor to cling to, and he took it, straightening his shoulders and nodding shortly at Snape. By the time he turned back, McGonagall had found her breath and was speaking to Connor.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, “your mother lost her magic to a ritual, and not a spell.”

"A Dark magic ritual," said Connor, undaunted. Harry tried to meet his brother's eyes, and could not. The loathing there was too deep. It made him dizzy and short of breath when he attempted to look into it. "I know it. Sirius and Mum told me all about it. He made her into a Muggle just because he wanted to eat her magic. He's a Dark Lord, too." Connor took a step forward. "He has to be stopped before he eats anyone else's magic."

Snape began to say softly, "Adsulto—"

Harry, recognizing the incantation for the heart attack spell, snapped, "Protego!" and stuck a shield in front of Connor that should repel the spell. Of course, that effort sent him to his knees. He really shouldn't have mucked about in Remus's head quite so much, he thought woozily. Then perhaps he would have more strength to devote to the effort of keeping both his brother and Snape alive.

Connor was glaring, and Harry felt a slithering force across his mind that he recognized as the compulsion gift. He managed to bounce it off, barely.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Remus was whispering.

And then McGonagall's voice cut over everyone, saying, very firmly, "Silencio."

Harry gratefully let the spell take his voice. He wasn't sure what would emerge, at the moment, if he tried to speak. He crouched on the floor and concentrated on getting his perception of the world back.

Of course, without the surety of affection from his brother that he had based so much of that world on, it was a harder task than he had expected. And by now his head really hurt.

Minerva caught her own breath and scowled at the wizards sprawled or standing around the office.

That's better, she thought. Not one of them has the sense that Merlin had when he advised Arthur against bedding Morgana. Wizards! If I want something done right, then I have to do it myself.

"Now," she said, when she was sure that she would manage to sound calm and not as if she wanted to bite all their heads off, "I'm going to release you from the spell, one at a time. I've already heard Connor's side of the story." She glanced once at Sirius, but he shook his head and turned away from her. Minerva restrained a growl. That one had been the bravest and most reckless of her Gryffindors, once upon a time, living as though untouched by any dark shadow. She had learned since that he was touched, of course, but she still found it hard to believe that all of his courage had been a façade. She released Remus instead.

He sat up slowly. His eyes still glowed, and the undeniable wild smell still plagued the air around him, but he was calm. He had no choice but to be, under the Catena spell. He looked at her once, and then away.

"Well?" Minerva demanded.

Remus sighed. "I gained some of my courage back, and asked Harry to free me from the Obliviate," he said.

"Why him?" Minerva checked on Harry. The boy really did look bad—pale as the Bloody Baron's blood, with one hand on his head as though it were about to split apart. "Why not Severus?"

"Because," said Remus, looking at her as though she were the one who had gone mad and tried to pass on lycanthropy, "Harry is the vates, and he could enter my mind because I'm a werewolf."

Minerva blinked a few times, and then shook her head. Of course she had suspected that something like that must be true, especially with the books that Severus had been lending her, but she had not thought there was any way that the boy could come to his power so soon.

She looked sharply once again at Harry. And it does look as though he's paid the price.

"And then what happened?" she demanded, to keep from getting angry at the thought of the poor boy suffering again.

"I came here," said Remus. His eyes briefly sparked, and then subsided again. He looked mildly confused. Minerva thought the confusion really belonged to the wolf inside him, who would not understand why it could not summon the rage to attack. "I thought Sirius would probably be in this room, and he was. Or maybe I was following his scent. I don't—I don't really know. I was too lost to the wolf. I only knew that I wanted to punish him for what he had done to Harry." He glared at Sirius. "After all, he was the only one of Harry's family actually at Hogwarts."

"James has gone somewhere," Minerva remembered, from what Albus had shown her in Lily's letter, "and Lily is still at Godric's Hollow."

"Is she?"

Minerva narrowed her eyes. "If it's necessary, Remus," she said coolly, "I will have you swear an Unbreakable Vow to me, that you will not attack or harm Lily Potter in any way."

Remus stared at her, and said nothing.

Minerva shook her head again. What a mess you have created, Albus. It was too bad that Albus was too powerful to take vengeance against, and that they needed him as leader of the Light side. Perhaps there were other ways to do it than straightforward magical assault, or exposing Albus's crimes against Harry and letting the boy suffer again along with him.

Then Minerva remembered the object she'd stolen from Albus's office the last time she'd been there, and relaxed. There are smaller ways. They're slower, but they're more guaranteed to work, too.

"I don't want you harming her, Remus."

Harry. He'd broken through the Silencio—Minerva wasn't surprised, not really—and had crawled over to Remus, one hand out as though to stroke the werewolf's cheek. Remus turned his head and gently nuzzled the boy's hand. Harry stared up at him with wide green eyes. Minerva thought those eyes had seen too much. She wished she could pick Harry up and put him in a place where he wouldn't have to experience pain ever again, but almost seventy years in the world had taught her that only death was like that.

Remus watched him for a long moment, then nodded. "If you're sure, Harry," he said. "But only if you're sure."

"Yes," said Harry. His voice was weary, but utterly determined, in the way that Minerva had felt herself when facing Voldemort in battle. "It's all done, between me and her. That's the end. You know what that ritual means. I know what it cost her, and what it cost me. I never want to hear about it costing anyone else anything."

Minerva couldn't help it. She turned and looked at Connor and Sirius.

She knew from the looks on their faces that it was too late for that—not to mention whatever the ritual had done to James and Lily's relationship. Sirius blamed Harry, in the odd way that he had lately of blaming his godson for everything. Connor blamed Harry, because he thought it was Dark magic that had left his mother a Muggle.

Minerva sighed. She did not know how to fix this. Even if Remus refrained from attacking Sirius or Lily in the future, the other two had heard him declare an intention to do so. They would probably never trust him again. Remus, as much as Harry, had just left half his family behind.

It is good that he has chosen Harry, at least, she thought, as she released Connor from the Silencio. If he had not, the poor boy would have no one among those he has known from childhood with him.

"Mr. Potter," she said, drawing Connor's intense gaze from his twin to her. "I will have your word here and now that you won't attack your

brother—in the corridors, on the Quidditch Pitch, in class, on the grounds, or anywhere else.”

Connor tilted his head back. His eyes flashed Gryffindor stubbornness and pride at her. They were traits that Minerva had loved and cursed in equal measure since the Hat had shouted out the name of her House for her. At the moment, she had more reason than usual to curse them.

“No,” he said. “He has to pay for what he did to our mother. And no one else is punishing him—“ the furious betrayal in his voice made her wince “—so I have to. I’ll attack him as often as I can.”

“Mr. Potter,” said Minerva, with a heavy heart. He will not understand. But if it comes to a choice between his not understanding and further suffering for Harry, I know which I will choose. “For every attack on your brother, you should know that you, in turn, will suffer a punishment. For the first one, you will have a week’s worth of detention with—“ she almost said Professor Snape, but then remembered the glances he had given the boy and decided that wasn’t a good idea “—Argus Filch. For the next one, you will not play in the Quidditch game against Hufflepuff. For the third one, you will not play in the Quidditch game against Ravenclaw, either. For the fourth one, you will be removed from the Quidditch team for next year as well.” She paused. Connor was staring at her in absolute betrayal and disbelief. “Do you understand?” she added softly.

“But, Professor,” Connor spluttered, “if you do that, then we have no chance at winning the Quidditch Cup!”

Minerva thought of the way that Severus would taunt her about that. It was astonishing how little the memory stung, beside the thought of Harry suffering, and not even defending himself against, his brother’s attacks. “I know,” she said.

Connor’s eyes widened, and she saw comprehension flood them after all. Of course, he lowered his head in the next moment and muttered, “Everyone cares more about him than me. I don’t understand.”

Minerva restrained herself from exasperation. The Boy-Who-Lived really was a boy, a child, and she would not yell at him, no matter how much she wanted to. She would explain instead.

"Mr. Potter," she said, and waited until his gaze was fixed sullenly on her again, "I want to tell you about the ritual that your brother used on your mother. It was an ancient one, and it could not have happened unless your mother had wronged Harry—so wronged him that she deserved to have her magic taken away."

Connor blinked. Then he looked at Harry. "I don't believe you," he said, his voice harsh, "but I'll listen if you can really tell me what she did to you."

Minerva faced Harry. Connor's response made her cautiously hopeful. Perhaps the boy could be rescued from Sirius's and his mother's influence, after all, and if it meant not having to either protect Harry from his brother's attacks or assign the punishments she'd promised Connor...

She was surprised, therefore, when Harry lifted his head and shook it, lips pressed tightly together.

Harry had already made his decision—long before he entered the room, actually, but in concrete fashion ever since he'd realized what he'd done, leaving Connor alone with Lily and Sirius for days.

He's already had his family ripped apart. I can't prevent that. I can't do anything to give him his father back, or his brother, or Remus. But I can let him have Mum and Sirius. They've already chosen to be heroes. I can confirm that.

Giving up his brother's regard hurt him like a branding with a red-hot iron in the center of his chest, but what did it matter? It was only another sacrifice, after all. It wasn't like he wasn't used to making them.

He felt Snape's hand tighten on his shoulder from behind. He felt Remus staring at him. He felt McGonagall's eyes narrow in disapproval. None of that mattered. He had suffered worse when his

brother first looked at him with hatred. He could ease past this best if he knew that Connor was also on the way to healing.

Lily had said that she wanted him to preserve Connor's innocence for as long as possible. Harry was doing so. Later, when he was ready to hear it—when his heart wasn't torn into tiny shreds by the loss of his mother's magic and the betrayal of his brother—then perhaps Harry could tell him the truth. But, for now, it would be like hurling himself against a wall while simultaneously tearing open Connor's wounds again, and again, and again, and again.

Harry had suffered enough of that himself in the last year. He would not let it happen to his twin.

Of course, he would not lie, either, but he could see what conclusions Connor was drawing from his silence, and he let him draw them. The victorious light in Connor's eyes grew brighter. Harry breathed a little easier. Anything, anything, was better than the defeat and despair he'd seen there.

"I'll keep your punishments in mind, Professor," Connor told McGonagall casually, and then went over to kneel beside Sirius, ignoring both Harry and Remus completely.

McGonagall tried to say something, but Harry didn't hear what it was. He'd done what he had to, and his body was demanding that he go to sleep. He yawned and did, not even hearing whether or not McGonagall released Snape from the silencing spell. He would have to hope she did. Snape was capable of releasing himself, of course, but if he did, then his anger was probably also severe enough to make him use wandless, nonverbal magic against Sirius and Connor. "Drink."

Harry blinked, but didn't have much choice, as the cup of pumpkin juice was practically shoved in his face when he awakened. He took it from Snape's hands and downed it, then looked around. He was on the Transfigured couch in Snape's quarters. He could feel the potions in the juice working, one to ease the pain in his head, another to ease his drowsiness. Harry yawned anyway, and sat up, continuing to sip at the juice.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Nearly midnight." Snape prowled around in front of him and stood there, watching him drink. Harry realized his face was blank—utterly so. His eyes held no smoldering hatred, no sarcasm, no anger. If Harry absolutely had to find words to describe his expression, or lack of it, he would have said that Snape looked serious.

Harry swallowed. "Won't Draco be worried about me?" he asked.

"He would be," Snape agreed, "but I have spoken to him, and he knows where you are. He said something about your giving him a Christmas gift tomorrow?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Yes."

Snape nodded. "But that is tomorrow, and this is tonight." He sat down on the chair that Harry had taken earlier, when he was freeing Remus from the Obliviate. "Harry. We must talk."

Harry tilted his head. "About what?" He could guess some of the subjects, but he had not expected Snape to address them this early or in quite this way.

"Your rushing into Lupin's head without any warning or preparation would be a good start," said Snape. He would have said Remus's name with a curl of his lip ordinarily, or the words themselves with dry sarcasm. He didn't. Harry felt his heart begin to pound, and shifted defensively backwards. "Why?" Snape asked.

"I wanted him free," Harry replied. "I was sure I could do it." And he had been sure, a rush of dazzling confidence overcoming him. Of course, there was more to it. "And I thought that Remus might change his mind at any moment and decide to stay hidden behind the barriers," he added.

"If he had changed his mind, then that was surely his choice," said Snape. "And I believe that he would have changed it back soon enough. There was no excuse for what you did, Harry. None."

Harry winced. "Did I hurt him?" he whispered. Remus hadn't seemed that hurt, especially since McGonagall had calmed him before he bit Sirius, but it was possible that Harry had caused mental wounds.

"No," said Snape. "But, quite apart from that, you could have hurt yourself."

Harry looked down at his hands, and said nothing.

"You have been reckless," said Snape softly. "Journeys into the Forbidden Forest. How many, Harry?"

"Just two, really," Harry muttered. "One with Remus and Sirius on a full moon night at the end of October, and one when Connor was in danger from Fenrir Greyback."

Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "And then there is the fact that you went to Godric's Hollow for Christmas," he said, "and released your parents from Fugitivus Animus, despite knowing that you could have put yourself in danger by doing so."

Harry looked up. "I didn't mean to release Dad."

Snape pinched his lips shut, as though he would say something about James Potter, but refrained. Harry was glad; it was the first sign he'd seen of the normal Snape since the conversation began. "Nevertheless, he was released," said Snape slowly. "Minerva assured me of that. And he has left Godric's Hollow, and gone Merlin knows where."

"Do you think he's in danger, too?" Harry asked.

"I don't care." Snape leaned forward abruptly, and the growl was back, twisting in cold anger under his voice. This time, though, Harry had the distinct impression that Snape really was angry with him. "The point is, what if he had decided to do something to hurt you before you could get to the Malfoys'? Or if he is hunting you even now? You have insured only that Lily could not hurt you."

"She was the only one I was angry enough at," said Harry.

"Because she used the phoenix web," Snape surmised.

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"You did not tell us about that," said Snape, his voice softer than darkness.

Harry looked away. "I didn't think that I could relive it."

"You managed in the Headmaster's office."

Harry gave his head a quick shake. "What's the point of listing all of these times I was in danger at me?"

"Because I think you have little to no care for your own life," Snape hissed, and reached out to catch one of Harry's wrists. "Or your own sanity, given the way you answered Dumbledore's summons the day it came, or how you stepped into the werewolf's head. Nor do you explain things that badly need to be explained." His free hand swiped across Harry's forehead, and came away covered with blood. Harry started guiltily.

"Draco mentioned something about nightmares," Snape said, staring hard at him, "and blood coming from your scar. Somehow, you had neglected to mention them to me. It is good that he did, or I would have panicked when you began bleeding and I could not wake you."

Harry swallowed. It was true that he'd had the dream of the two dark figures writhing in torment again, and the circle of shadows closing in. But he had kept them from Snape because...

"I didn't want you to worry," he whispered.

"I choose to worry," Snape snapped. "And I worry when I see you continuing a self-destructive course that you have pursued for months, long before you confronted that woman who was pleased to call herself your mother."

"You told me once that I could not treat you as a child, nor coddle you. But you must have restrictions, Harry. You will hurt other wizards as well as yourself if you do not. I consider it a miracle that you turned to a ritual to deal with Lily, and not rage that could have destroyed everyone in the house."

"It was a near thing," Harry whispered.

Snape nodded grimly. "I am going to allow you to choose the restrictions," he said, "so that you can live with them. But there are going to be restrictions, Harry. I promise you that."

Harry met his eyes, and let out a slow breath. "Would you start teaching me Occlumency again, sir?"

The tight lines around Snape's eyes relaxed the slightest bit. "That would be a start."

Harry sighed, and prepared himself for a relatively long series of negotiations. He didn't mind as much as he pretended, though he still didn't completely understand why Snape was so worried about him, as he had managed to survive, and he had trained to make his death, when it came, mean something.

But beneath the incomprehension was a glimmer of warmth.

This is more proof, I think, that he really does feel the affection he says he does.

Draco tore the wrapping away from his present and let out a crow. "Harry! Where did you find one?" He turned the book around in his hands, delightedly, and then flipped open to a random page. He grinned at Harry in the next moment. "This dance says that you're never supposed to have your elbows on the table while eating," he said, prodding at Harry's right elbow.

"I just found it," said Harry vaguely, drawing his elbows back and watching Draco in amusement. The truth was that he'd combined a Transfiguration spell with his wandless magic one day in early December, just before Lucius Malfoy's visit, and managed to create

what he wanted: a book of pureblood rituals and dances, drawn from his own memory, that would enhance Draco's training in them. But Draco was watching him like a hawk that morning, and seemed to take any evidence of wandless magic as evidence of exhaustion. Harry was not going to get into an argument by mentioning how he'd created the book. He infinitely preferred a happy, cheerful Draco.

"It's wonderful," said Draco, and admired the book's white leather cover for a moment more before he turned and pushed Harry's own present to him across the table. "Go on, open it!"

Laughing, Harry opened it—and gasped. He lifted the round object gently out, blinking. It was a clock, rather like the family clock that had hung in Godric's Hollow, with hands for his parents, Connor, him, Sirius, and Remus. However, this one had four hands, and thus four names, on it.

Draco, Harry, Snape, Narcissa.

In place of times, the clock displayed titles for TRAINING, SLEEPING, EATING, WRITING, STUDYING, IN DANGER, HAVING FUN, IN CLASS, MAKING POTIONS, and, Harry was simultaneously pleased and disturbed to note, PLOTTING. Snape's hand was firmly lodged under the last one. Narcissa was writing something, probably a letter.

Draco's hand was under HAVING FUN, and as Harry watched, his own hand shifted from EATING to that one, as well.

Harry swallowed several times, and then raised his eyes to Draco's face. "Thank you," he said softly.

Draco smiled at him. "You're welcome." He paused in the midst of saying something else as an owl skimmed overhead and landed on the table, brushing crumbs of breakfast out of the way as it offered its leg to Harry. Harry looked with a frown at Draco, but Draco only shook his head, shrugging. He didn't know what it was.

Harry unrolled the long, slender package, surprised to note that it was a wand made of some polished dark wood, probably ebony. The note that came with it was brief and to the point.

Mr. Potter:

This wand belonged to a friend of yours who has been too long without it, in a gray and dreary place. Please see that it is returned to him. A certain weaver of webs has had it for twelve years.

There was no signature, but Harry didn't need one. He saw the handwriting on his Transfiguration homework all the time.

He looked up the head table, and met McGonagall's gaze. The professor saluted him with her goblet.

Harry gently placed Peter's wand back in the package and nodded to her. He avoided Dumbledore's gaze, and his brother's, because he wanted to enjoy, just for one moment, this feeling of warmth and alliance, without having it spoiled.

"Now you have to tell me what that was," Draco said.

Harry blinked and looked at the family clock, then smiled slightly. His hand was pointing firmly at PLOTTING.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Trelawney's Second Prophecy

"Catch."

That was all the warning Harry gave Peter before he tossed him his wand. It seemed to be the only warning Peter needed, though, as he snatched the wand deftly out of the air with his hand—his left, Harry noted—and then pulled it close to him.

Harry halted and watched with a small grin, taking the opportunity to renew his warming charms. Peter stared at the ebony wand with the look that Harry imagined he would have if one of the other Marauders walked up, stuck out his hand, and offered to renew their friendship. His wrist trembled as he slowly held the wand up before him, pointed it at nothing in particular, and whispered, "Lumos."

Harry applauded as light began to glow at the tip of the wand and spread out in front of him, illuminating the snow that stretched around the edge of the Forbidden Forest, unbroken save for his tracks, Peter's, and a long, thin, sinuous trail that Harry thought he could live without knowing the source of. Peter pulled his wand back towards him. He was still staring.

Then he looked up and let out a short breath. "Where did you get this?" he whispered.

Harry shrugged. "McGonagall delivered it to me. You'd have to ask her." He grimaced and adjusted his scarf so that it wrapped more closely around his neck as a gust of chill wind nipped at his throat. Peter wore ragged clothes bundled on ragged clothes. Harry knew he was probably stealing them. At least he'd be able to use magic now, with his wand back. "I've had it for about three weeks. I'm sorry I couldn't come out and see you earlier to give it back, but Snape kept me on a tighter leash than I thought." The one good thing Harry could say about the restrictions Snape had negotiated with him was that he filled the time Harry had to spend in the castle with defensive magic training and brewing potions other than Wolfsbane. If Harry had been forced to do completely non-productive things during that time, like sleep, he would have fretted.

"Thank you," Peter whispered one more time, and slipped the wand into his coat pocket.

Harry hesitated, then asked. "I wanted to know how you were avoiding the Dementors for so long, and managing to survive."

Peter flashed something that could only be called a grin because it was on his face and used his teeth and lips. "I spend a lot of time as a rat, Harry. We don't get cold as easily, and I can always find plenty to eat."

"Oh, right," Harry muttered, feeling stupid. But then, he'd been feeling that way an awful lot these past three weeks. He suspected that he'd made a mistake, but asking Draco and Snape about it only produced vehement assurances that no, he hadn't. He had come here only partly to return Peter's wand.

Peter recognized the signs on his face, and made a soft snorting noise that Harry suspected no rat, ever, had made. "Ask the next question, Harry. I promise you, I don't bite." He bared his oversized front teeth again. "Unless you're Dumbledore."

Harry laughed, and used the laughter to ease his way into the next question. "Um—do you know what happened with Lily?"

Peter nodded slowly, his eyes fastened on him. "I've been—sniffing around a few places where Dumbledore neglected to close the wards," he said. "I wasn't a Marauder for nothing, you know. And I heard some things. But not the whole truth."

Harry let out a sharp breath. "Well. I used a justice ritual on her. A pureblood dance. It made her a Muggle."

"And your brother blames you," Peter surmised easily. He sighed. "I'm not surprised, really. Lily and Sirius got to him first, and for Merlin knows what reason, they've always wanted to fill his head with drivel. I suppose you told him the truth and he disbelieved you entirely, yes?"

Harry swallowed. Here was the crux of the mistake he suspected he had made. “Um.”

Peter stared hard at him, eyes beady in the faint light still glowing from inside his coat pocket. “Harry,” he said, sounding shocked.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I really did mean to,” he said. “Honest. But I thought he should get to have whatever family and innocence he has left, and—“

“You’re a fool,” said Peter bluntly. Harry blinked, but nodded. He could accept the insult without flinching. He certainly deserved it if he really had made the mistake he’d suspected he’d made. “Sirius isn’t fit to be anyone’s family. And Dumbledore is the one who’ll control him now. Lily can barely act without his control.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” said Harry, remembering the Muggle’s eyes, and then pushed the notion away. He didn’t like thinking about her. “The thing is, I don’t know how to tell Connor about the justice ritual without telling him about everything she did to make it necessary.”

“The phoenix web?” Peter asked.

Harry nodded. “Among other things.”

“And why would you want to keep them secret?”

“I don’t like anyone knowing about them,” said Harry flatly. “Everyone who knows about them does so either because they did them, or because they suffered something similar—like you—or because I couldn’t prevent them from learning about them.” He scowled, thinking of Snape, and how he’d kept prying details of his nightmares from Harry, details that Harry had never meant to give. “And I thought that Connor shouldn’t have to grow up so fast—“

“I was hoping you’d share my story with him,” said Peter, his voice rising slightly. “I was hoping to see him out here with you some night. I thought he was simply being stubborn, or Sirius had got to him first and convinced him to believe whatever he wanted. But now, to hear

that you haven't told him at all—" He narrowed his eyes at Harry. "I'm disappointed in you, Harry."

Harry took a deep breath and forced the screaming memories to retreat and leave his mind clear. That was one of the Occlumency techniques that Snape had taught him, one that let the memories swim under the surface of his thoughts, present, but not interfering with his emotions. He couldn't hear the echo of the Muggle's voice in Peter's every time he said something like that. If he had failed, then he had failed, and that didn't mean that he'd failed the intense training program the Muggle had set him, where his failure would mean his brother's death.

"I'll talk to him, then," said Harry quietly. "I asked Draco and Snape about it, but they both said I didn't have to."

"You have to," said Peter, almost violently. "Go to Dumbledore if you have to, if Connor won't listen. Ask him what it would take to win your brother free." He leaned back and stared hard at Harry. "Do you know one of the reasons that I agreed to become Sirius's sacrifice in the first place, Harry?"

Harry blinked. "I thought Dumbledore persuaded you. Or compelled you. And that Sirius was going to break."

Peter inclined his head. "There was some of all of that. But truly, I thought it would...win me their true friendship. I loved them. I could already see by our sixth year in Hogwarts that they didn't love me in quite the same way." His mouth twisted. "I was too small, or too fat, or not sympathetic enough, I suppose."

Harry wondered how long it had taken him to recite those truths without flinching to himself.

"I thought," Peter whispered, "that being a sacrifice would make them realize how much I was worth."

He opened his hands and raised his voice again. "And it didn't. They never came to see me in Azkaban. They never seemed to think of me again, except to describe me as an evil traitor."

He looked directly into Harry's eyes. "Sacrificing yourself like this isn't the way to get your brother to love you, Harry."

If he had punched Harry, he could not have stunned him more. Harry stood there, blinking, the mist of his breath steaming before him, and could not think of anything to say.

"Go talk to him," Peter whispered. "If you love him, but not only because of that. If you want him to love you. I should have refused Dumbledore. The others couldn't have disliked me more than they did. And I would have had my freedom. I think you can have more than that. If you love your brother so fiercely, then there must be something good there to love."

"Go talk to him."

Harry took a deep breath, nodded once, and then turned and walked back to school, hearing behind him the scamper of a rat's paws on the snow.

"Connor."

Connor turned around and tensed. Harry walked up to him, breathing as calmly as he could. He reminded himself that everyone else would be at dinner in the Great Hall still, or working furiously on homework due the next day, as it was Sunday evening. He'd tracked Connor to this remote corner of the school with the Marauder's Map. He could speak with him without anyone else interfering.

Connor folded his arms. "I'm meeting Sirius," he said, voice sharp as a slap. "Go away."

"I can't." Harry shook his head. His hands were shaking, too. He clasped them behind his back to still that quiver. Nearly as strong as his fear of telling the truth was the nausea at the thought of what his failure could have cost Connor. Harry tried as hard as he could to ignore his training. It wouldn't do either of them any good now.

Connor watched him in silence. His arms were still folded, his head tilted to one side, his hazel eyes narrowed with dislike. Harry realized abruptly that the pose was one he hadn't seen his brother use before. He'd almost certainly copied it from Sirius.

"I have to tell you about the ritual I used on Mum," said Harry. He could call her that, for the sake of repairing his relationship with his brother. He didn't want to call her "the Muggle" and see Connor's eyes widen in disgust. "It was a justice ritual, Connor, not a vengeance ritual, whatever they told you. I promise. It wouldn't have worked if she hadn't hurt me."

"So Professor McGonagall has been trying to convince me," said Connor, in a lazy drawl that sounded like Sirius...maybe. Harry hadn't heard Sirius sound quite so contemptuous. Maybe this is the voice that he uses when they're alone and talking about Slytherins. "But it's not true. I know it can't be true. Mum and Sirius already told me that it was a vengeance ritual."

"I promise it was," said Harry. "What do you want me to swear by? Merlin? Magic? My love for you? I'm prepared to swear by any and all of them." He was, too. That would content some of the anxiety beating in his mind, in fact. A pureblood ritual was just the thing.

"I don't want you to swear by anything," said Connor, his voice unexpectedly raw. "Mum told me that you'd try an oath like that, to get me to listen. She said I couldn't trust you, that it wasn't possible for a Slytherin to keep his word. And Sirius agreed with her."

Harry took a step back, uncertain, then rallied. "I don't—"

"Have you seen her, Harry?" Connor whispered. "Have you seen her at all since you made her into a Muggle and took her magic away from her? She looks like a moth. She can barely move, barely lift her head from her pillow in the mornings. Sirius Apparated me to Godric's Hollow to see her. If Dumbledore hadn't sent a house elf to take care of her, she'd be entirely alone, since Dad ran away like the coward he is." Connor's voice scraped and hissed. "She has no interest in

anything. She doesn't want to eat. She sleeps all the time. Does that sound like you left her fucking alive?" Connor's voice was rising now.

Harry winced. They were in the fifth floor corridor, but Connor could attract a prefect's attention any moment. But he had promised Peter he would do this, and he did want Connor to understand, if he could.

"She hurt me, Connor," said Harry in a rush, before he could change his mind.

Connor stared hard at him, then shook his head with a snort. "No, she didn't," he said. "I never saw a bruise on you, and you couldn't have hidden that."

"Not that way," said Harry. "Mentally. I had something called a phoenix web on me. You can ask Hermione about it if you don't believe me. She can confirm it exists. It bound my magic, and it forced me to think about serving you and loving you before anything else."

Connor stared at him. Harry stared back, and waited for some reaction.

Then Connor shook his head again and said, "I don't understand. You've always loved me anyway, Harry." His voice was wistful. It changed before Harry could take advantage of it. "Or I thought you did. So if the web was forcing you to love people and not hurt them with your magic, then it was good. It must be." He took a step forward. "Is that why you don't love me any more, why you hurt Mum worse than killing her? Because you were only a good person because the web made you be?"

Harry clenched his hands. "No," he said quietly. "It's much more complicated than that, Connor. You don't understand everything yet. I can tell you the full story—"

"She said you would do this, too," Connor interrupted. "Mum, I mean. She said you would say that I didn't understand everything, and that you had to tell me long stories to explain everything. I don't believe it,

Harry." His face had entirely closed now. "She said so, and she wouldn't lie. She loves me."

Harry bit back an eruption of bile. He recognized his mother's tactics, all too well. He had left things too long.

Connor turned away. Harry moved forward and gently took his brother's arm.

Connor came around swinging. Harry rolled, and managed to make it look as though the blow had hurt him more than it did. As it was, he just grazed his cheek on Connor's fist and his shoulder on the floor.

"What's all this, then?"

Harry glanced up, blinking, as Percy Weasley came into the light of the torches. His face was flushed, as though he'd hurried down the corridor, and his eyes darted suspiciously between one of them and the other.

"Were you fighting, Connor?" he demanded. "Ten points from Gryffindor if you were fighting."

"No, Percy," said Connor, with a wide-eyed innocent look that Harry recognized from Sirius's face long ago, before any of this had happened. "I promise. I was on my way to study, and he ambushed me."

Harry met Percy's eyes steadily as Percy turned and looked at him. He didn't get a steady gaze in return. Percy glanced away at once, then flashed his Head Boy badge.

"I'm rather afraid I'm going to have to take you to see the Headmaster, Harry," he said. "Can't get away with keeping students from their studies."

Harry nodded sharply, once. He didn't know why Percy was here—probably watching over him at Dumbledore's orders again, the way he had been last year—and he didn't care. Peter had told him to try

Dumbledore if all else failed, to try and get Connor away from Lily and Sirius.

"Let's go, then," he said, and set off firmly in the direction of the gargoyle, leaving Percy to stumble after him.

"My dear boys." Harry marveled that the Headmaster could sound perfectly calm with Percy, red-faced and panting, and Harry, his body tingling with magic, in front of him. But he did sound that way, and he waved them to the two chairs that Harry recognized as having been there when he and Snape had visited. This time, there were no tricks with the height. They could sit in them comfortably, though Percy was mopping his face as though he had run too long a way and could not possibly be comfortable. "What can I do for you?"

"I caught Harry fighting with Connor in the corridors, sir," said Percy, in that pompous tone. Harry wondered idly if it was unique to him, or if all Head Boys had it. "And since you told me—well, since Connor is so important, I thought it best to bring him to you right away."

"Of course, of course, Percy. That is the kind of initiative a Head Boy should take." Dumbledore turned to Harry. "And what do you say, Harry? Were you fighting with your brother?"

Harry met Dumbledore's eyes. The old man was calm and patient, damn it, and Harry could feel the dangerous boil of his own temper. He more often got hot anger than cold lately, it seemed. Snape said that was a sign of progress. Harry wondered if that was really what they should call it, but he could hardly dispute it; his own cold anger had frightened him, and Snape knew more than he did about Occlumency.

"I would like to speak to you in private, sir," he said. "About my brother."

Dumbledore waved a courteous hand at Percy. "Mr. Weasley has a share of responsibility in caring for the castle, too, Harry. I would say that he can hear anything you say to me."

"About my mother, sir? And Sirius?"

Percy stood at once. "Oh, I could leave, Professor Dumbledore, if these are private family matters—"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, his eyes on Harry. "Perhaps you should." But he still sounded curious, intrigued, rather than upset. It frustrated Harry.

He closed his eyes and pictured one of the pools of quicksilver that Snape had taught to him, one of the fluid containers for his emotions during Occlumency. They worked far better than solid ones like the box, but they operated on the same principle. By the time Percy shut the door, Harry was calm again. He opened his eyes and made himself meet Dumbledore's gaze without much expression.

"Now, Harry?" Dumbledore encouraged him gently. "You were saying?"

Harry let out a deep breath. "They've poisoned Connor's mind," he said. "They told him lies about the justice ritual. And I want him removed from them. They're putting him in danger."

Dumbledore sighed. "Your mother has a right to see her child, Harry. Since your father has vanished, and Connor does not have another guardian, she is his best protection, right now. And Sirius would never wish to kill or harm Connor as he did you."

Harry blinked. "Why?"

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "When you heard about the—unpleasantness—in Sirius's past, I told you, Harry. It is Dark magic that exacerbates the failing stability of his mind. You leak Dark magic. He does not like Severus, or Slytherins, for much the same reason. But Connor's gift is Light. He and Sirius have done enough research to convince me of it. Connor is safe with Sirius as you would never be."

Harry bit his lower lip. "Still, sir, Sirius is insane. I would like if it I could go to lessons with Connor."

"As I would have been able to say if you had not interrupted me," Dumbledore continued, "there is no longer his insanity to worry about—though I cannot speak of what his loathing for Dark magic might push him to do. I have made a device for him that confines his thoughts and leads them back into soothing patterns when they become too agitated. Before Christmas, I thought he could manage, but seeing what happened to your poor mother has become too much for him."

Harry shook his head slowly. "So you could have cured him at any time?"

"This is not a cure," said Dumbledore. "It is a prevention—much as Muggle crutches will prevent one from collapsing to the floor, but do not cure a broken leg by themselves. It took me some time to work out that it was needed, and why it was needed, and to make it. You can ask to see it for yourself if you like. It's a large golden ornament that he wears on a chain around his neck."

Now that Harry thought about it, he had seen such a chain around Sirius's neck. But he hadn't been around his godfather long enough to notice any true change in his behavior.

He debated for a moment whether he could leave it there, but then his thoughts returned to the bile that Connor had spewed in the corridors. Yes, some of it had Sirius's mark, but more had his mother's.

"I don't think he should be around the Muggle, either," he said firmly. "She's dangerous."

"And who made her that way, Harry?" Dumbledore's gaze was level and absolutely clear.

Harry once again dipped some of his emotions in the quicksilver. "Please, Headmaster. I am asking you to remove him from her. You can take up guardianship of him yourself. I think it would suffice, since after all the Ministry does trust you—" he thought of Scrimgeour to calm himself this time "—and I know that you value him."

Dumbledore simply watched him, until Harry thought the man's face had frozen in that inscrutable expression. Then he said, "I will not deprive your mother of her only true son, Harry." Harry flinched despite himself, and the Headmaster continued speaking as if he had not noticed. "But if there was a way to reverse what was done to her, then I might agree, since I could give her a son back to replace the one she stole."

Harry wondered if he had plunged all his thoughts underwater, and not only the ones that had produced uncomfortable emotions. His vision swam as he said, "You know that the ritual cannot be reversed, sir."

"I was not thinking of that," said Dumbledore, and spread his hands. "I was thinking of putting you under the phoenix web again, making you what you were. If you agree to that, I will take over the training of Connor's compulsion gift from Sirius, and Lily will not see Connor again until she is more—herself, and ready to deal with him."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. This was the keenest pincer that had yet gripped him.

He had said that he would never go under the phoenix web again.

But Connor was in danger.

But he had said that he was never going back under it.

But Connor was in danger.

But he had said that he needed his freedom.

But Lily might hurt Connor.

Harry thought he might have come close to crying then, except that he never wanted to cry in front of the Headmaster.

He made his decision.

He took a deep breath, ragged with the sound of sobs, and stood, and met Dumbledore's expectant eyes.

"Fuck you very much, sir," he said quietly, and walked out of the office.

"Oooh, yes, dear," said Professor Trelawney excitedly, as she peered into Lavender Brown's carefully arranged leaves from around the lake. "Yes, I think I see your future husband in here." She paused so that Brown's giggles could rush over her, and continued. "Yes, quite a handsome fellow he is...tall, and what is this? He is wearing a crown!" She turned and blinked at the class who crowded behind her, many of them half-asleep in the incense-soaked Tower room. It was an unusually warm day for early February, which didn't help the situation. "Who can tell me what a crown means?"

A few people desultorily flipped through their books, looking for the symbol. Harry caught Hermione's eyes and rolled his own. Hermione made the same gesture back. She was looking increasingly disgusted with Trelawney, and now and then her hand went up to toy with something around her neck, something that kept radiating incredibly powerful magic when Harry bothered to pay attention to it.

Ron and Connor were on the other side of the room. It looked like Ron was imitating Trelawney, and earning a snort of laughter from Harry's twin. When he saw Harry watching, he frowned.

Harry glanced away. He was beginning to hate this waste of a class. He had signed up for Divination so he could share another class with Connor, but that had been in the warm camaraderie—of a sort—last year, when anything had seemed possible. Harry was becoming steadily convinced, however, that Trelawney would only ever say something useful by accident. He stayed in the class for those hints, now and then listening as she twittered over tea or leaves or bits of spun spiderweb.

And he could talk to Hermione, of course, he thought, as he leaned carefully nearer the Gryffindor witch, watching the professor from the corner of her eye. It was a mark of Hermione's disdain for the subject

that she actually would talk instead of listening diligently and scribbling notes.

“Anything?”

“Nothing,” Hermione whispered back, the way she did every class. This time, though, she hesitated, and drew the thing around her neck out of her robe. Harry blinked at it. It resembled nothing so much as a small silver hourglass dangling on the chain. It was polished to a bright sheen, but he saw nothing about it that should make it so powerful, unless—

“A Time-Turner?” he whispered.

“Of course,” said Hermione, looking a little displeased that Harry had managed to guess what the thing was without her input. She shrugged in the next moment, though, and checked on Trelawney’s position—the professor was now going on about Parvati Patil’s luck on the next Tuesday when a full moon occurred—then whispered, “Professor McGonagall got it for me so I could attend more classes. I just have to be careful never to meet myself.”

Harry nodded. “And you used it in the library to research the phoenix web, too?” he asked.

Now Hermione did look annoyed. “How did you know that?”

“You wouldn’t have got it out unless it had something to do with what we were talking about, and we were talking about your research on the phoenix web,” said Harry, with a shrug.

Hermione muttered something that sounded like, “Slytherins,” but she went on before Harry could call her on it. “I tried, Harry,” she said. “I found books that hinted at its existence, and told me where to look. But every single book I tried to find was gone. They’re either in the hands of a Professor, or they’re in the Restricted Section.” She looked cross.

Harry sighed. He supposed he should have suspected that. Dumbledore. Always an irritant.

What he wanted Hermione to do would have been much easier with proof, but there was the chance that Connor would trust the word of his friend even without it. “Can you talk to Connor?” he whispered. “I tried to tell him what being under the phoenix web was like, and he didn’t believe me that it was evil. I know we don’t have the books, but you were in the meeting that day, and—“

“Mr. Potter!” Trelawney fluted at him. She was hovering right over him now, and staring down into the muddy, moldy, half-frozen leaves that Harry had laid on his table. “Let us see what your leaves say.”

They say you’re an old bat who should shut up and leave me alone, Harry thought in annoyance, but he restrained his temper. He looked once at Hermione, who nodded at him. Trelawney mistook the reason for the nod, and turned to Hermione.

“And what do your leaves say, dear?” she asked. “Or do you have an idea what Mr. Potter’s leaves say?”

Hermione opened her mouth, a sharp look on her face, then glanced at Harry, sighed, and modulated her voice into a sickly sweet tone. “I’m sorry, Professor,” she said. “I couldn’t quite read this bit.” She stabbed at a curling, wet brown corner off one leaf. “Do you think it’s a sailing ship, or a cloud?”

Trelawney shifted over to look. Harry flashed a grateful smile at Hermione, who glared back at him.

One day, she really is going to lose it at her, Harry thought, as he leaned back and waited for the charade to end. But not today.

Harry left Divination early and by himself, as usual, but lingered near the bottom of the ladder to the Tower. He ought to be able to hear Hermione’s and Connor’s conversation from there. He knew that Hermione would start out in a reasonable tone, but Connor’s voice would probably escalate.

What he didn’t realize was how quickly it would happen.

“—don’t talk to me about my brother!” Connor yelled. “I know that he put you up to this. It’s not true, it’s not, and I don’t want to hear anything about it again!” Then he added something else, something low-voiced and vicious that resulted in a loud gasp, and a whisper from Ron along the lines of, “You really shouldn’t have said that, mate.”

Hermione came down the ladder in the next few minutes. Harry didn’t quite dare to speak to her. She gave him a dire look, shook her head, said, “Him,” and stormed off up the corridor.

Harry sighed. He knew it wasn’t the best time to go talk to his brother, but at least he knew where Connor was, and they would have an audience, in the form of Ron and Professor Trelawney. He didn’t think Connor would hurt him too badly with them there. At least the subject was uppermost in his brother’s mind right then.

He’d just put a hand on the bottom rung of the ladder when he heard a skittering noise down the hall. Harry spun, his magic rising around him. He squinted when he realized that he could see only a small rock, moving back and forth by itself, in the middle of the hall. It paused as if it saw him watching it, then turned and rolled down the corridor.

Harry drew his wand.

Something else skittered out from nothingness and joined the pebble. It was a spider, Harry thought, but then he saw the flash of the torches off metal and jewels, and snarled to himself. It was another artificial Dark creature, like the one that had attacked Draco.

He approached the thing with long strides.

The pebble stopped rocking, and the spider scuttled to meet him with a rush of air. Harry flung himself to the side, aimed his wand, and muttered, “Petrificus Totalus.”

The spell didn’t work, as he had thought it might not. The spider stood facing him, motionless for a moment, then flung out a loop of jeweled

silk into the air. Harry watched it warily. Was it going to grab the ceiling, or the floor, or a torch sconce?

It did none of those things. It drifted in the air for a moment, then abruptly exploded into a cloud of silvery spores.

Harry covered his nose and mouth and ducked at once. He had heard about things like this. Breathing in the spores was not a good idea. He coughed anyway, and felt dizzy, which might have meant that some of them got in, but he retained his consciousness and his balance.

No more playing around, he thought, and spoke calmly. “Reducto.”

The spider smashed apart. Harry walked over and carefully kicked at the pieces to make sure they wouldn’t move anymore, then glanced around. He could see no sign of more spiders, nor of whoever had released this one.

He shook his head and walked back to the ladder, keeping an eye over his shoulder. He supposed he would have to tell Draco and Snape about this, though the attack was so small and seemed pointless. Was it a warning? Of what?

Harry quelled the temptation to run back to the dungeons to check on Draco. He would, as soon as he was done talking to his brother. Connor was still up in the Tower. Maybe Ron was arguing with him about whatever he’d said to Hermione, and that meant that Harry could catch him when he was feeling guilty.

He climbed until he reached the Divination classroom, and felt an odd stillness in the air even as he entered it. He felt a wind brush past him, and saw a silver flash near the wall that had him drawing his wand again.

What bothered him most, however, was the sight of Trelawney, her eyes rolled back in her head and her voice a chill, dead monotone, as she recited words at a stunned Connor and Ron.

“...stand or fall.”

Then she collapsed.

Harry must have made a noise, because Ron turned around and saw him. He was dazed, shaking his head. Connor hurried forward to help Trelawney.

"I was going to talk to him..." Harry whispered, eyes on the downed teacher.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Ron, and grimaced as he began scratching at his shoulders. "She just went crazy and recited a load of drivel at us."

"Did you not remember it?" Harry demanded. He didn't think Trelawney was more than a fraud, really he didn't, but if ever circumstances would pull a true prophecy from her, these were the circumstances. He checked for another sign of the silver flash, but couldn't see it.

"Sorry, mate, no." Ron shook his head. "I don't—"

"Go away."

Harry looked at Connor's face and surprised a murderous expression there. Carefully, he raised his hands and backed towards the entrance of the classroom again.

Of course, he felt obligated to ask. "What was it, Connor? A prophecy? Was it meant for you?"

"I don't have to tell you." Connor's face was flushed an ugly red. "And I don't want to talk to you, Harry. Go away."

Harry turned and left, quietly. He would continue his efforts to get on his brother's good side and help him whether Connor wanted him to or not. This time, though, he would have the added curiosity of what exactly the prophecy might have said about his brother. Of course it would be about him, since he was the one who had heard it, and the Boy-Who-Lived.

That night, a new nightmare came hunting him.

Harry found himself on a flat dark plain, with shadows the only things that moved in the distance. He couldn't see any buildings or trees. He stamped on the ground, and realized it was hard as iron. He shivered.

Then, abruptly, a dark, four-legged shape sprang into motion on the far side of the plain and rushed towards him.

Harry jumped out of the way just in time. He relaxed a bit in confusion, watching it as it ran. Was he seeing a werewolf? Or something else? He couldn't make out anything other than the fact that the thing was four-legged, and fairly large.

He didn't make out the much smaller creature that pursued the large one until it sprang and apparently locked teeth on the side of the large one's neck.

The large thing screamed.

Harry screamed along with it. Pain that reminded him of Crucio wracked his body. He woke in a few instants, thrashing and tangled in his bedsheets, and all but blind. It took him a moment to realize that that didn't come from the sheets, but from the blood pouring out of his scar and over his eyes.

Draco was there then, cradling his shoulders and attempting to soothe the pain. It was already gone, but Harry couldn't find the voice or the breath to tell him so. He let Draco hold him and wipe the blood out of his eyes, and nodded when he thought he was all right to go to the hospital wing.

He remained silent even as Madam Pomfrey clucked and fussed over him, and Draco explained earnestly that he'd fallen and hit his head on his way back from the bathroom, because he was thinking about the images in his dream.

Though he didn't know why his mind kept circling back to the idea—the shapes had been less than silhouettes, and he had no reason to

think this was true, or even that the dream meant anything—he believed that the shapes he had seen were those of a rat and a dog.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Gazing on Connor

If there is one thing I have learned, Albus thought, as he moved into the Great hall for breakfast, it is the importance of adaptability.

He took his seat at the head table and nodded to Sirius and Severus, the only ones already seated there. Sirius nodded back at him, a bright smile on his face. He smiled all the time since Albus had given him the golden bauble to hang around his neck. It really had been simpler than Albus had thought it would be to confine his thoughts and turn them back towards calmness. Because Sirius had not often let him look into his mind before, he had not known how many of those thoughts revolved around Dark magic. Having a central focus made them far easier to confine.

Severus scowled at him and turned away. Albus hid a sigh. He had behaved badly earlier in the year, he knew. Had he walked more carefully, he might have managed to retain Severus's loyalty—though an unusually large piece of it seemed to have been given to Harry Potter.

He knew why he hadn't walked more carefully. His emotions had blinded him, most especially his horror and dread of what Harry was becoming.

If I had thought about it, Albus decided, as the porridge appeared in his bowl and he began to eat, I would have realized what I had to do. Alas, thought was the furthest thing from my mind at that moment.

He knew how to survive. He knew that things changed, and he did have to change with them. Had he retained that lesson in the forefront of his mind, rather than the lessons imprinted by doing nothing about Tom Riddle while he was still a child, then he thought he would still have Harry as at least a tentative ally.

Things change, but must they be shoved along? Tom would freeze all things into changelessness, so very greatly does he fear death. And with Harry, or rather, with the vates he could become, all is change.

He lifted his head, eyes seeking Harry across the Hall. He was seated at the Slytherin table, of course.

Albus sighed to remember his utter surprise when the Hat had proclaimed Harry for Slytherin. It wasn't what he had expected, from Lily's account of the boy and what he observed when he visited Godric's Hollow, but that did not excuse his reactions. So much had been lost in that moment. If he had been faster, then he could have contained the damage. He could have invited Harry to his office and explained that no one would disdain him for belonging to the serpent House as long as he still acted with proper caution and courtesy and chivalry. Harry understood the ideals of sacrifice and lived them better than anyone else Albus had ever seen. He would have understood the idea of continuing with the sacrifice.

Albus could even have cast an auditory glamour charm, so that the Hat's shout would have sounded as Gryffindor instead of Slytherin. Then Harry could have gone into his proper House, and much disaster would have been averted.

But that would have required me to have some idea of what the Hat was going to shout, Albus thought, as he finished his porridge and turned to his pumpkin juice, and as we have already established, I did not.

There was a tone of self-deprecation to his thoughts, and he did not know why there should not be. He had made mistakes. He could admit it now, now that it was late February and the first flush of many rages was past—Harry's unbinding his magic, demanding Sirius's past, hurting Lily....

Now he would have to live in the changed world that had come about at least partly as the result of his mistakes, and adapt to what followed.

I must still be the balance, he thought, and his gaze went from Harry to Connor. The Gryffindor was chattering with his friends. Sirius's return to sanity had been good for him. He once again had an adult at the school whom he trusted unreservedly, and his friends somewhat helped to make up for the loss of his brother.

I must be the balance between frozen order and unbridled chaos. Only on the middle ground can life continue in the wizarding world much as it had been, without the reign of terror that Voldemort would bring about cruelly or Harry would bring about innocently.

There was still the chance that things could proceed as they always had. Albus was not defeated. His pieces moved on the board yet. He could turn Harry back to his brother's side, and train Connor into the kind of leader who would swing the balance between order and chaos himself. Harry still bore part of the phoenix web. The longer he remained away from Connor, the more impatient it would get to bring him back to his brother's side.

That was the first possible path.

The second chance was that Harry would tear more and more free of Connor, and matters would continue to worsen. In that case, Albus knew, he would have to strike a truce with Harry—some bargain that would hold. He would have to ask the boy what he most wanted, and seal the matter, perhaps with a pureblood ritual. Albus dreaded matters coming to that pass, since he knew it would mean having to tell Lily that she really would never see her elder son again, but he was prepared to accept it now. In that case, nothing he did would make that much difference to Harry one way or another, until that fatal moment; this chance was the one that had the least impact on his plans.

That was the second possible path.

And in the third...

Albus narrowed his eyes, though he kept his face calm. The third was unpredictable, and he feared it would bring about the change and the chaos that he so feared. But he knew it also grew likelier the longer his patient, methodical plan to capture Peter again was delayed. At any moment, Peter might realize that Harry did not know the whole truth, or Harry might show it to him with a careless comment. And yet, the patient, methodical plan could not possibly be rushed.

If Harry learns the whole truth about the prophecy...

That was the third possible path, the one where Albus would have to do the most adaptation, the most pure survival, and the most careful guardianship. Should it come to pass, he would have to be Harry's ally, because there was no other choice with a wizard that powerful and that intensely violent at the mere mention of compulsion. Yet he would have to be prepared to turn against him at any moment, too, because if Harry went too far, Albus was the only one with the power and the commitment to hold him back.

And yet, the ironic edge to his thoughts, his constant companion in the last two months, pointed out, Harry would never have hated compulsion so much if you had not bound him. You have forged your own bane. You made him more like a vates by tying his magic.

Albus nodded, and put the regrets away. There was no room for them.

As Severus left to teach his first class and Minerva arrived to eat breakfast, as Sirius all but bounced out of the Hall while winking at Connor, as Harry stood and departed with the Malfoy heir in his wake, Albus sipped his pumpkin juice and reached out slowly, delicately. In his office, a Pensieve was glowing, and the memory it showed would be of a night twelve years ago when Albus had cast another phoenix web. From there, delicate, delicate threads of compulsion snaked out and towards Peter. Albus did not know exactly where he was hiding, nor how long it might take him to reconnect with the reordered phoenix web. He knew he was having some success; it was Peter who had suggested that Harry visit Albus, winning the Headmaster another chance to make an offer to Harry, and Peter had said that he wanted to visit with Connor, thus setting up a situation in which he could be seen as a great threat to the Boy-Who-Lived and the Ministry would agree to send more Dementors from Azkaban to capture him.

But Albus did not know when he would win, and the pressure to do something more than this was growing greater.

Albus put the regrets away again, and wondered what wizards did who had never learned that ability.

Harry wasn't surprised that Draco accompanied him to breakfast. The spider attack and the nightmare in early February had obviously frightened him. But since it was now a Sunday at the beginning of March, Harry felt a bit justified in turning around and confronting him.

"Draco," he said.

Draco looked at him. "What?"

"I'm going to the Owlery," Harry pointed out.

"Yes," said Draco, and looked at him.

"You don't need to accompany me there," said Harry. "It's the Owlery. People don't lurk up there waiting to ambush other people. It would happen in the dungeons if it would happen anywhere at all."

Of course, his internal history book promptly reminded him of some times during the First War against Voldemort and the war against Grindelwald when people had indeed been ambushed in Owlries. And Draco was shaking his head already. "You need someone with you at all times," he said.

"You trust me to be in Snape's office and Divination class alone," said Harry.

"I trust Snape," said Draco, and leaned casually against the wall. "And I have people I've talked to who are in Divination and are keeping an eye on you."

Harry blinked. "Who?"

Draco just smiled at him.

"I'm feeling a bit crowded," said Harry, after wondering who it could be and coming up with nothing. "Please, Draco, I'd like some time

alone to send this letter off." He gestured with the small bundle, wrapped in silk, that he held.

"You're sending it to my father," said Draco. "I should be able to watch, I think."

Harry rolled his eyes and set off again. It wasn't worth arguing over. Besides, he didn't have the time. He had hesitated in sending the next truce-gift to Lucius as it was, and now it would barely get there in time for Lucius to choose the next gift and reply by vernal equinox. And right after he sent the letter off, then he was going to slip away from Draco, whether his friend liked it or not, and find Connor.

He kept trying to convince his brother of the truth. Each time, it escalated into punches, and the last time, Connor had drawn his wand. Harry knew he could have pinned his brother in place and forced him to listen with magic, even sent the truth driving into his mind; Snape was teaching him Legilimency.

That was exactly why he broke the confrontations off when he did. He would not compel Connor, not in any way. His brother had to listen freely.

They arrived in the Owlery to a welcome of coos and hoots and shifting on perches. Harry held his arm up, and Hedwig stooped down to him before he could call for her. Harry blinked, then shrugged and attached the bundle carefully to her leg.

"Lucius Malfoy, at Malfoy Manor," he told her, and fed her a bit of pastry he'd saved from breakfast.

Hedwig ate it delicately, slid a strand of his hair through her beak, and then rose and swooped through the window. Harry watched her go with narrowed eyes. When he concentrated, he thought he could see a binding that trailed her, or perhaps which she flew along, anchored to the Owlery's stones.

"What was in that?" Draco asked, startling him out of his daze. Harry blinked and shook his head. A faint headache from returning so soon to normal sight plagued him. At least it was better than the headache

from the nightmares—which had, admittedly, lessened since his dream about the rat and the dog, so that he dreamed only of the circle of closing shadows.

“A stone I enchanted so that your father could break my neck if he crushed it,” Harry answered, and turned towards the stairs.

Draco’s hand on his arm jerked him to a halt. Surprised, Harry turned and found Draco staring at him, wild-eyed and angry.

“What?” He packed an awful lot of emotion in that one word, Harry thought dryly. He would have to get Draco to show him how he had done it.

Harry shrugged, trying to remove the tight grip. It just got tighter. “He gave me a branch that could break his neck if I broke it,” said Harry. “I couldn’t respond in less than kind.”

“Yes, you could,” said Draco, looking as if he didn’t know whether to be angrier with Harry or Lucius.

“No, I really couldn’t,” Harry said, and lifted his chin to look Draco directly in the eye. “The truce doesn’t work that way, Draco. He knew how vulnerable he was making himself when he gave me the branch, but he also knew I would give him a vulnerability back.”

“What’s his next gift going to be?”

“I don’t know,” Harry answered calmly. “This is the part of the truce where the one who initiated it gets to choose the gift, and I just have to make an acceptable answer. I get to choose my own midsummer gift, though.”

Draco opened his mouth to say something else, but two things interrupted them at that moment: an owl gliding through the window and heading for Harry, and a cough from the doorway. Harry glanced past Draco’s shoulder and saw Ron waiting there, looking a bit red in the face.

Harry said, "Just a minute, Ron," and took the letter from the owl's leg. It was a snort note only, without the Ministry seal, which didn't tell him who it was from until he'd opened it.

Dear Mr. Potter:

What you ask of me would be most unwise.

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry frowned and crumpled the paper in his fist. It was unwise to ask Scrimgeour to try and arrange to have Lupin as Connor's guardian? Why?

But he knew the Auror was unlikely to give him answers with further pestering, if this was all he had sent, and Harry owed him too much to pester.

That left him with almost no choice, again. Dumbledore would have been more suitable than either Lily or Sirius, and Harry had the most realistic chance of getting the Ministry to agree to the Headmaster, but Dumbledore had named his price for the guardianship, and Harry was not going back under the phoenix web. James returned everyone's letters unopened. Lupin was "unwise." Snape had developed a hatred for Connor apparently almost as great as his hatred for Sirius, and Lily and Sirius would both fight the choice of McGonagall.

I suppose I don't have any other choice but to ask her, though, Harry thought, dismally.

Ron coughed again.

"What do you want, Weasley?" Draco asked. "Come to Transfigure owl pellets into Galleons? Or perhaps this is the place that you do your laundry?" His gaze took in Ron's worn robes with spectacular contempt.

Ron turned red, but spoke to Harry instead of Draco. "I have a message for you from Connor," he said.

Harry stared blankly at him. "A message?"

"Too good to speak to his own brother, is he?" Draco asked with a sneer.

"Shut up, Malfoy, it's not like that," Ron snapped at him. "This is a pureblood thing." He glanced uncomfortably at Harry. "I suggested that he try it, and, well, he said he'd think about it. Now he's actually done it." He came forward and placed a small scroll in Harry's hand.

Harry glanced up at Ron as he unrolled the parchment. "You don't want to tell me what the prophecy was, do you, Ron?" he asked, the same question he'd asked every time he saw the other boy since that day in Trelawney's Tower. He'd overheard Ron and Connor discussing the prophecy in hushed tones, and knew the other boy had indeed remembered it.

Ron's face turned even redder. "I'm not a snitch, Harry," he said, with a kind of quiet dignity in his voice. "And I'm loyal to my friends."

Harry sighed. He suspected he wasn't going to get the truth out of Ron short of reading it from his mind or compelling him to say it. And both of those smacked of slavery to him.

He read the parchment, and blinked.

Meet me on the vernal equinox at sunset, in the Owlery. Do not approach me again before then. Connor Potter.

Harry let out a long, slow breath. Vernal equinox, when the winter turned to spring, and the day and night were exactly as long as each other. And sunset, a time of equal balance between dark and light.

This particular time and date had been used for reconciliation rituals almost since the beginning of pureblood culture.

Harry could feel himself smiling as he put the parchment in his pocket. "Tell him I'll be there," he told Ron, whom he now realized was fulfilling the formal role of messenger.

Ron nodded. "I'll tell him." He gave Harry a little bow, then turned and left.

Draco opened his mouth and said something sneering and disdainful about Connor or Ron or both, no doubt. Harry ignored him. His heart was beating, hard, with cautious hope.

He might be able to reconcile with his brother. He might.

At dinner the evening of the distasteful encounter with Weasley, Draco leaned back and scowled across the Great Hall at the chattering Gryffindor table.

Connor was the center of them, the prat. He wasn't at all subtle about it, either, which made Draco think he was rather missing the point of power. His mother and father had taught him all about that—his father with explicit lessons, his mother by living it. A Malfoy didn't just walk around proclaiming that he was powerful. It had no class, and it made other wizards more likely to put their backs up. Besides, it wouldn't work with Slytherins, with Ravenclaws, even with some Hufflepuffs, particularly the cleverer ones like Smith.

But it worked with Gryffindors, and there was a certain raw strength in the way that Harry's brother marshaled them. They knew he was having private lessons with Harry's mutt of a godfather, and they knew that he had some special secret magical gift, and they knew that something terrible had happened to his mother. Add the lingering mystique of the Boy-Who-Lived, and that won him sympathy and admiration in almost equal amounts. It was a rare Gryffindor who managed to resist a combination of glormongering and pity-slobbering.

Draco narrowed his eyes with dislike as he watched the Patil girl say something to Connor. Connor said something back, and the Patil girl burst into giggles. Connor leaned back and made another observation, looking hard at the Slytherin table, and everyone started laughing, except Granger, who was obviously trying hard to concentrate on her book.

Draco turned and looked at Harry, and shook his head. The twins were hardly comparable. Harry didn't have to brag about his terrible tragic past or his power. He ate, he slept, he studied, he did homework, he walked around, he plotted an awful lot (at least according to his clock), and he made efforts to reconcile with prats who obviously didn't deserve them.

And he turned heads.

Power rippled out from him slowly and subtly, lapping onto others, making them think and whisper and debate, and thus inspiring other people to think and whisper and debate. Slytherins floated nearer to Harry bob by bob, lured by the fact that he had this magic and wouldn't use it to rule over them. Older students watched with narrowed eyes, and sometimes asked probing, testing questions that Harry answered with more honesty than he should have—except that the strength of his magic protected him. The Slytherins who had kept secrets from Harry last year were beginning to share them with him, forgetting that he hadn't been raised perfectly pureblood and didn't grasp many of the things that were instinctive to them.

Harry, the prat, continued not to notice.

Draco shook his head, and gave one more hard look at the Gryffindor table. There was the figurehead people actually paid attention to. Eating calmly beside Draco was the soldier who would actually change the world.

Granger looked up and met his gaze just then. Draco raised an eyebrow. She nodded back, confirming without words their deal that she would watch Harry in Divination class.

Sometimes, Draco mused, it was a good thing that Harry was so oblivious to emotional matters that concerned him. There were threats that he also didn't think to watch for, and this way other people could protect him without his peevish arguing.

Snape was in a foul enough mood to actually welcome teaching the third-year Gryffindors and Slytherins as they tumbled into class that second week of March. Anything was better than the fifth-year class and the Weasley twins.

They had varied the Eternal Repair Potion in a way that Snape still couldn't figure out, then used it to stick their classmates' cauldrons to the desks. No matter what spells Snape cast, the cauldrons remained stuck. The twins stood in front of him with wide, innocent eyes and hidden smirks no matter how many points he took from Gryffindor, so Snape had finally been forced to Vanish everyone's cauldron and threaten the students into obtaining new ones by next class. The twins had received two weeks' worth of detention, each, which Snape had deliberately scheduled to include times that he knew the Gryffindor Quidditch team was practicing.

The twins did not seem to care.

Snape didn't bother writing out the instructions for the Child's Game Potion. It was a simple antidote to several of the common hexes that children were always getting themselves hit with, for situations with accidental magic where Finite Incantatem wouldn't work predictably. He simply waved his wand, conjured the instructions, and barked, "You will turn in a sample of the potion at the end of class." That made everyone scramble for their cauldrons.

Snape caught a few betrayed looks from among the third-year Slytherins. He usually gave an introduction to the potion, at least, and explained what it did and why they were making it; unlike every Gryffindor but Granger, they actually listened. Snape ignored them. Life wouldn't hand them introductions to potions, nor would opponents on the battlefield stand still and patiently explain what every hex did. It was time they learned to stop leaning so heavily on him.

He was self-knowing enough to admit, as he stalked among the students, that part of his impatience came from the fifth-year class and part from the increasingly insistent flare of the Dark Mark on his left arm, so keen last night that he'd had to charm the limb immobile this morning. He was angry enough not to care.

"Like this, Neville," Harry was explaining as Snape circled them like a stalking werewolf. "The lavender petals have to go in before the beetle carapaces. Do you know why?"

Longbottom worried at his lip for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. "Because the petals make the potion smooth and ready to receive the carapaces?"

"Exactly," said Harry, so warmly that Longbottom flushed. Then he caught Snape's eye and paled.

Harry looked up, too. Snape scowled at him. Harry gazed calmly back, not at all intimidated. "Our potion isn't quite ready yet, sir," he said.

Snape noted to himself that he would have to find Harry a different partner than Longbottom soon. Longbottom had improved out of all recognition, and it was time that he, just like all the others, learned to stand on his own. Besides, Harry could more productively lend his knowledge among the other Slytherins. Crabbe was starting to slip badly enough that Snape soon wouldn't be able to bring himself to ignore it.

"I can see that, Potter," he said. "When do you think it will be ready?"

Harry turned his head to look at the directions on the board. "An hour from this point forward, sir," he said.

Snape sneered. "Then see that you brew it, Mr. Potter, instead of talking to me." He swept away. He could feel Harry's eyes on his back, still not intimidated. The boy had shown more tendency to argue with him this week about what Snape thought they should practice in their private lessons, as well as how often he should be allowed out of Hogwarts.

That will have to be corrected, Snape thought, even as he turned to vent his anger on a deserving target.

Connor Potter was partnered with Ron Weasley; they always worked together, unless Snape assigned one of them elsewhere. Currently, they were arguing in heated whispers about whether to add the

lavender petals completely crushed, as the directions clearly called for, or in large shreds, because that took less time. Snape wondered what cruel whim of fate had sent him students unable to follow simple directions.

The Potter brat glanced up as Snape approached, and then narrowed his eyes and sneered. The look had Black stamped all over it. It was the same look he was always giving Harry whenever they passed in the corridors. Snape considered the brat a waste of time, beyond hope of redemption, and did not know why his ward continued to try and redeem him anyway, against Snape's explicit advice. That, combined with how much he resembled Black now, gave Snape all the excuse he needed to lay waste to the Potter brat's confidence.

"Mr. Potter," he said, and looked down into the potion. It was, of course, congealing, as neither Potter nor Weasley had thought to continue stirring it while they talked. "Pray tell me, do you intend to have the lumps in your potion large enough to injure whoever swallows it?"

Potter's glare intensified, but he said nothing. Instead, he lifted a hand to rub at his head. No, Snape thought, since he had become used to watching for the gesture with Harry, at his forehead.

A drop of blood welled from the heart-shaped scar, just behind his rubbing fingers.

Snape stared in fascination as the drop trickled down the scar and started to fall, and then moved a few precise steps backward.

The blood fell into the cauldron, and caused a prompt explosion of noxious fumes. Snape waited until Potter and Weasley had each got a good lungful before he caged the fumes in the air with a few sweeps of his wand and then Vanished them. He nodded to Granger.

"Accompany them to the hospital wing, Miss Granger. I will be spending time with students who are not so stupid as to disdain knowledge offered," Snape drawled, and moved back towards the Slytherin side of the room, feeling immensely better.

Of course, he did have to consider what it meant that Connor Potter was bleeding from a supposedly Voldemort-inflicted scar, much as Harry Potter was.

Nothing significant, I hope, he thought. If that brat is truly the savior of the wizarding world, then we might as well hand ourselves over to the Dark Lord right now.

Minerva had to admit, as she checked to make sure that the teacups were in place on the desk and that she was sitting in a straight, upright posture, that she was nervous. She had never done anything like this before.

Oh, there were some students she might have considered it for, but that was a different thing than actually doing it. And it was far different than doing it at the request of the student's brother.

A prompt knock sounded on the door, and Minerva let out her breath. "Come in," she called.

Connor peered around the door at her. Minerva eyed him. Harry was right. He did need someone to intervene. He might smile more brightly than ever, but his eyes were shadowed, and he looked as though he wasn't getting much sleep. He absently rubbed at his forehead and that famous scar as he shuffled across the room and slouched into the chair in front of her desk.

Minerva indicated the teacups on her desk. "Would you like some tea, Mr. Potter?"

He stared at her, then sat up in the chair. "Just tell me what this is about, please, Professor McGonagall," he said. "I thought we were going to discuss my Transfiguration project, not..." He trailed off and waited.

Minerva sighed and folded her hands in front of her. "I think that you need a different adult to look after you, Connor," she said, dropping the surname that might remind him of his family and distance him from her. "I know that Sirius and your mother are doing their best, but

your mother is, obviously, deprived of magic and thus of much meaningful participation in our world. And Sirius is...unstable."

"He hasn't been for weeks!" Connor snapped.

"Yes, well." Minerva had once believed that it was impossible to think that Sirius Black really meant harm. That he didn't mean harm was the whole trouble, of course; when something bad did happen as a result of his pranks, he only had to wink and grin and look a bit contrite, and he was excused. But now, she was not sure. "That does not mean I'm not concerned over your future, Connor."

Connor's eyes narrowed, and an odd expression came onto his face. Minerva would have said it was Slytherin, if she didn't believe that the boy despised Slytherins with all his heart and would never look like one.

Willingly, she added in her head.

"You really think that Mum can't take care of me without magic, Professor?" he asked.

"I think that she has trouble enough taking care of herself," said Minerva quietly. When she had asked for more details about Lily Potter, Albus had willingly provided them, especially when she explained that she meant to comfort Connor Potter. He seemed to believe he was luring her back to his side. Minerva was letting him think that. "And I know that you are at a point in your magical education when you will need to keep learning even over the summer. And given who you are, Mr. Potter, you have...well, more threats than most to worry about."

"Voldemort's tried to kill me three times now," said Connor. "I escaped each time. And Sirius is teaching me now, and Mum can still teach me, even if she can't lift her wand and show me herself." A spasm passed over his face, something Minerva thought was anger or grief or pain. "Harry made sure she couldn't," he whispered.

Minerva leaned forward. "I am offering to train you, Connor," she said. "You could live at Hogwarts over the summer while you learned."

Connor blinked at her for a moment.

Then he shook his head.

Minerva frowned. “Is something wrong, Mr. Potter?” She cursed herself for the slip the next moment, as the boy’s face became even more closed.

“You don’t trust Sirius or my mum,” he said softly. “And you didn’t suggest my father or Remus, even though you could have. And you didn’t suggest the Headmaster, who would be better at training me than anyone else, and maybe have some time during the summer, too.” He looked her straight in the eye. “Please tell me. Did Harry put you up to this?”

“Yes,” said Minerva, and then blinked, one hand rising to touch her mouth. She hadn’t meant to say that. It seemed extremely odd that she had.

“Thank you,” said Connor, and then slipped out of his chair and made for the door.

Minerva called after him. “Please, Mr. Potter, tell me that you’ll consider it.”

Connor paused and glanced over his shoulder. His face had gone quiet, his eyes introspective. He looked more like Harry in that moment than Minerva had ever seen him look.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” he said quietly. “I can’t. My mother lost a son, and Sirius lost a godson. I can’t make up for Harry, but I don’t want to make them lose me, too.”

He shut the door gently behind him.

Remus forced himself to stop pacing. He had the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff third-years arriving for their Defense Against the Dark Arts class in five minutes. He couldn’t look worried to death.

But he also couldn't stop himself from picking up the letter that lay on the desk and reading it again.

Dear Remus:

I have no reason to think that you'll read this once you recognize my handwriting, but I wanted to reassure you that I did get your letter. And I'm responding to you where I didn't respond to anyone else because I think you'll understand. Sometimes we Marauders take a long time to make up our minds. You and I were always the longest.

I'm safe. I'm at Lux Aeterna right now, just staring around me, and I'm thinking. It feels like years since I thought. It feels like sweeping cobwebs out of my mind. It feels like looking on the consequences and evaluating them. All of them.

And that's what I'm doing, Remus. Two and a half months of thinking, and I still can't make it all come straight in my mind. Of course, I have thirteen years of mistakes to think over and set to rights. Peter and Albus and the prophecy and giving up my position as an Auror and Connor and Harry and Lily.

Lily.

It probably doesn't shock you to know that I still love her, Remus. You were always good with things like that. And I always felt like I could talk to you about anything.

But not this time. Not everything. This is something I have to work out on my own, if I'm ever going to be the father—and the husband—I should have been. If I'm ever going to be the man I should have been, I think on the bad days.

Enough of this self-indulgent whining! Keep my boys safe if you can, Remus, and watch over Sirius. I did read one of his letters, and I know that his mind is safer now than it's been in a year, thank Merlin and thank Dumbledore (even though I can't stop thinking awful things about him, either).

I'll be there, if I can, at the end of the year.

Mischief managed,

James.

Remus let out a sharp breath, and then really did fold the letter and put it away again when the students came into the room. He would need all his concentration to deal with this class. Today was their first practical lesson, after months of theory; Quirrell and Lockhart had left the class in such a shameful state that Remus had felt compelled to start with that first.

Besides, any teacher, Remus was fervently convinced, would need all his or her concentration to deal with having Hermione Granger and Zacharias Smith in the same class.

He met their gazes with a calm smile as they settled into their seats, did a mental tally of the roll—everyone was there—and asked, “What was the last thing you remember me telling you about Dark creatures?”

Zacharias’s and Hermione’s hands were in the air at once, but Hermione’s was marginally faster. Remus nodded at her. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“That some of the Dark creatures feed on the fear they cause,” Hermione said. She didn’t only imitate his words, but also the intonation with which he’d delivered them. Remus wondered if she realized she did that with all her professors. Hearing Severus’s deliberate pauses and slicing tones filtered through her voice was really quite startling. “Dementors, for example,” she added, and that was more her own voice.

“Very good, Miss Granger,” Remus said, with a nod. “Five points to Gryffindor.”

“But you also said that we were going to face a creature that caused fear today,” Zacharias cut in, using all his trained pureblood poise to try and make himself look taller than Hermione. “And I don’t think that

you would bring a Dementor into the school, Professor. Is it a boggart?"

"Five points to Hufflepuff," said Remus. He sighed as he noted Hermione glaring at Zacharias, and Zacharias glaring right back. At least we will be practicing magic in a moment, and they will need to be using spells, so they can't compete with each other at the questions. "Yes, indeed, Mr. Smith." He turned and walked back to the edge of the desk, gesturing with his wand to float out the heavy trunk he'd brought from his rooms. The trunk bucked as he set it down. More than one student flinched.

"A boggart will take the form of what you most fear," he informed his class. Everyone was paying attention now, he noted, and none of them looked ready to interrupt. "That is why they are considered Dark creatures; they pull emotions from their victims' minds, and, as Miss Granger noted, they do feed on them. The incantation to defeat a boggart is Riddikulus. It draws on laughter, an opposing emotion to the fear that boggarts try to invoke, and it requires the caster to use force of will, to resist the compulsion trying to overtake his or her freedom. And, of course, once others begin laughing, a boggart is done for." He measured the class with his eyes, looking past both the most eager—Hermione—and the most nervous—Neville. Finally, he nodded to Justin. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley. If you will come forward?"

Justin stood with a small swallow and came forward, his wand held out. "What was the spell, Professor?" he asked.

"Riddikulus," Remus supplied with a smile.

Justin repeated it to himself a few times, then nodded. "I'm ready, Professor," he said.

Remus cast Alohomora on the trunk, and stepped out of the way as the boggart burst free, a confused shape for a moment as it tried to pick out fears from the minds of the people around it. Then it focused on Justin, and abruptly became an enormous dog, with serrated teeth so long they overedged its jaw. Remus blinked, and hoped that Justin never faced Sirius in his Animagus form.

The boggart strode forward, snarling. Justin shivered and seemed to have trouble getting his wand up. His face had gone pasty white.

“Something that amuses you!” Remus called, ready to wave his wand and banish the thing if the challenge proved to be too much for Justin.

But Justin caught his breath, waved his wand, and shouted, “Riddikulus!” In the next moment, a baby bonnet appeared on the dog’s head, and a tiny kitten was sitting on its neck, mewing and swatting at the dog’s mouth to get its attention. The hound whirled about, seemingly confused, and the kitten clung on, hissing and spitting.

The class burst into laughter, and Remus nodded. “Well done, Mr. Finch-Fletchley!” He flicked his eyes to the person immediately behind him. “Mr. Potter?”

Connor stood up and came forward. Remus had to admit to some curiosity as to what form his boggart would take.

The hound burst apart into a cloud of smoke, and then rushed forward together into a smaller shape.

Remus felt his heart tighten painfully. Connor’s boggart was Harry.

Connor was staring at his brother, or the form of his brother, with sick terror in his eyes. The boggart-Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose and took a step forward, aiming his wand at Connor and wearing a smile that Remus sincerely hoped did not come from real-life experience.

Connor aimed his wand, with difficulty, and managed to whisper, “Riddikulus.”

It took him a few more tries, but the boggart-Harry finally tripped, broke his glasses, and started groping around blindly. The class laughed again—at least, most of them did. Remus noted that there was a nervous edge to the sound, and that Hermione was scowling as though her face would burst. Zacharias leaned back in his chair, gaze flicking around, coolly evaluating his classmates’ reaction.

At least in that they are matched, Remus thought, heart heavy, as he motioned Connor back and Ron forward. Since Harry's boggart, after all, was Connor lying dead because of his failure.

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Visit From Dobby

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew something was poking him, but he didn't immediately know what it was. It felt like a long, narrow finger, and the eyes peering down at him from above looked like house elf eyes. But why would they be? House elves never came and woke students in the middle of the night, and it was the middle of the night now. In the morning, Harry had to receive Lucius's vernal equinox gift. At sunset, he had to face his brother. He wanted to get all the rest he could before then.

But then he realized the house elf was Dobby, and the fogs of sleep cleared from his mind. He sat up, keeping his voice low. "What's the matter, Dobby? Did something happen to Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy?"

Dobby shook his head so hard his ears flopped. His eyes were enormous, and seemed to glow, Harry thought. "No, Dobby came for Harry Potter sir," he said. "Harry Potter sir must get up."

"Did something happen to Draco, then?" Harry asked, as he reached for his glasses. He managed to slip them on and listen to the noises behind the curtains at the same time. He could hear nothing but the familiar breathing of his roommates. Draco sounded deeply asleep.

"No," Dobby whispered, and then gestured. Harry looked. Fawkes sat on the end of his bed, not asleep as usual, but watching him with bright, grave eyes. He inclined his head slightly when Harry stared back at him, and crooned.

"Harry Potter must come walk with Dobby and Fawkes," Dobby translated. "We have something to show you."

Puzzled but obedient, Harry nodded. "Let me get a cloak on. If we're going outside, then I'll need it."

Dobby said nothing to contradict that, so Harry ghosted around his bed and to his trunk. He listened intently to the breathing around him as he got the cloak out and slung it around his shoulders. Greg, Vince, Blaise, and Draco seemed convinced that nothing was happening.

Harry winced when he thought of what Draco and Snape would say about this outing, but it wasn't as though he would be unsafe with Fawkes. He was sure one of them would have said something about the phoenix accompanying him as an approved guardian, if only they had thought of it.

Thus having satisfied his conscience, Harry turned around. He assumed they would walk out of the room, but Dobby firmly grasped his hand.

"Harry Potter sir must hold tight," he said.

Harry had barely nodded when they appeared to leap sideways into the air and stand still at the same time. Or perhaps everything else had moved around them, Harry thought, impossible as that was. He used the thought to keep his dinner down. His brains and his stomach violently sloshed against the insides of their respective containers. He blinked when he was able to see again, and stared around at the place that Dobby had brought him, probably by house elf Apparition.

It was familiar, but he still couldn't get a grasp on it until Fawkes burst into being above them and illuminated it with his flames. Then Harry recognized the clearing where he had once bargained with centaurs for Draco's life. He stamped his feet and shivered. It was colder now than it had been when he made that bargain, and slushy snow still huddled sullenly in the shelter of the bare trees, spring tomorrow or not. The ground felt like iron, like nothing alive.

"Harry Potter must be seeing," said Dobby in his squeaky voice. "And this is the best place to see." He looked expectantly at Harry.

"What do you want me to see?" Harry looked around again. There were the large stones the centaurs had used to form their impromptu gallows for Draco, and the path that dipped over the crest of the hill with the gallows on it and then continued on. He saw no waiting centaur, no impossible tree, nothing that he thought a house elf and a phoenix might have taken him out of Hogwarts to show him.

Fawkes crooned, and Dobby ready translated. "Harry Potter sir is to see what he saw in the journey with Fawkes."

The flames? Harry thought, but he realized the truth in a moment.

The nets.

He thought back to what he'd felt during the journey with Fawkes, and immediately his emotions about the Muggle tried to rear up and attack him. Harry breathed calmly, and subdued them with his Occlumency. He reached back with pure memory instead, thinking of the emotions pinned between glass panels like the butterfly collection the Muggle had described having once. He had always had a good memory, letting him retain information about spells and history and Connor's enemies and pureblood dances.

When he felt sure that he was as raw, as open to seeing another world behind the wizarding world, he glanced up.

He stared. He had not expected to see so many different webs. They were the gold of the phoenix web in places—and Harry felt the shattered remnants of the one in his mind stir briefly, as though feeling the kinship—but a great, intricate pattern at the center of all them shone a subtle, heartbreakingly silver, and there were spiky patterns of dark green that made Harry want to hiss. He thought those probably bound magical snakes. He turned around slowly, and watched the webs soar around him. It was like standing in the center of a snowflake, if snowflakes shone like rainbows and with more colors than had appeared in any rainbow.

"What are they?" he whispered.

Fawkes crooned, and Dobby spoke in a subdued tone. "What Harry Potter saw once before. The nets that bind us."

Harry turned, squinting hard at Dobby, and saw the net that circled around him, a bright ice-blue. It ran away towards Malfoy Manor in the distance. He cocked his head. "They bind the house elves into service?"

"Yes," Dobby hissed, and for a moment, he looked feral, almost frightening. Harry thought about the magic of house elves, who could

Apparate even in areas, like Hogwarts, that human wizards could not, and who didn't need wands, and wondered if this was what the wizards who bound them had seen. But Dobby calmed in a moment and peered mournfully at Harry. "And worse than service. They make elves like the service." He clapped his hand over his mouth then and wailed through his fingers, something about being a bad elf.

Harry nodded grimly. Genius, really. It means they won't try to lift the web themselves. He turned back to the maze of nets again and waved a hand. "And these?"

"Different magical creatures," said Dobby, and pointed to the silver web. "The unicorns."

"Unicorns?" Harry echoed blankly. "What did they ever do to wizards?" He could understand the nets being used on dangerous creatures like giants or dragons, and of course house elves lived among wizards and made their lives easier, but binding unicorns seemed pointless.

"They were too beautiful," said Dobby.

Harry ground his teeth. "And this one?" he said, squinting at a dim blue web he could barely see, the color of the sky at sunset.

"Centaurs," said Dobby. "To prevent them from showing themselves to Muggles, to prevent them from harming wizards, to prevent them from using much of their own magic." He shrugged apologetically. "Dobby only knows some of the effects. Dobby is sorry. He is not studied in history."

"Do all house elves know about this?" Harry felt a little sick. So easily this could have been set to rights in the past, perhaps, by any powerful wizard, if only they had thought to ask the house elves. He wondered if Dumbledore knew, and if he would really leave the webs in place if he knew.

Well, he used one on me. Probably, the answer is yes.

"Yes," said Dobby. "Elves were the first ones bound, Harry Potter sir." For the first time, Harry noticed how the elf gave a little jerk when he added the title. In a human, Harry would have called it a flinch of disgust. "Elves can see the other webs. Elves know what they do."

"But you can't rebel," Harry surmised.

"Only bad elves rebel," said Dobby, and then put a hand over his mouth again and gave Harry an appealing look from wide eyes.

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself down. "And you want me to unbind the webs and set you free?" he asked.

"It is not that simple, Harry Potter sir," Dobby squeaked.

Of course not, Harry thought, and waited for the reason. I think I would die of shock if anything in my life were ever simple.

"Harry Potter sir can be a vates," said Dobby simply. "Prophet, singer, poet, seer." His words were hushed with reverence, and had the sound, Harry thought, of a litany, a chant, a mantra. "Harry Potter can see ways for us out of the webs. And he can do it while respecting free will." He waited, eyeing Harry expectantly.

Harry grasped the truth soon enough. "I have to set you free without trampling the free will of anyone else," he said. "And that includes the wizards who benefit from having you bound and wouldn't want you to go free."

Dobby bobbed his head, and one of his ears hit him in the eye. "Now Harry Potter sir sees," he said, and clapped his hands.

Fawkes flew to Harry's shoulder and settled, his body a warm presence near Harry's right cheek. Harry stroked his back, neck to tail, without really thinking about it. He was thinking fiercely on what they had told him instead.

I have the ability to compel other people. It might be easy to charm or enchant other wizards into releasing the magical creatures. But then I would never forgive myself. And most of the wizards aren't the ones

who set the webs. And I have no idea what releasing the webs would do. Would the house elves turn on them—

Us, Harry. I benefit from this too. It's not like I've never eaten food that house elves cook, and I depend on them to clean my room and my clothes and my sheets.

Harry sighed. I bet it really is simpler, being Dark. You just do whatever you want to do without thinking of the consequences to others, and if someone complains, then you compel them again. Or you could be a Light Lord and think you were doing good, and not care about what others thought, because obviously they aren't seeing clearly if they disagree with you. You're good.

No wonder that Starborn said so many Light and Dark Lords went insane or gave up on this. How am I going to do it?

To take his mind off the seeming impossibility of his task, he asked Dobby, "What made you think that I might be a vates? My brother found some information in a book about goblins that made it sound as though he were one." Only it didn't sound much like it, now that Harry thought it over. Could a vates ever use compulsion, much less as naturally and freely as Connor did? If the goblins were bound as well—and Harry suspected they were—then would they really only follow a wizard, or would they be compelled to do so by the nets they wore and nothing else?

"Connor Potter sir is not a vates," said Dobby. If a house elf could snarl, Harry thought, Dobby would be doing so. "Connor Potter sir is a compeller, and happy to be so. A vates can never compel. He cannot compel wizards. He cannot compel house elves. He cannot compel centaurs. He cannot compel phoenixes."

Harry shook his head. "Then I can't be one, either. I can compel people, and I've done it."

"But Harry Potter sir is sorry," said Dobby promptly. "And Harry Potter sir did not mean to. And Harry Potter sir is watching out, now, and watching how his will impacts on other people."

Harry blinked. It was true that he was training with Snape to try and find the limits of his odd compulsion, so that he could bind that part of his magic without binding the magic itself, but he had not thought that would qualify him for Dobby's title, even so. "And is being sorry enough?" he asked quietly. "Surely other wizards would be sorry, if they knew about this."

Fawkes went off into a long, complicated series of chirps and trills. Dobby waited until the phoenix had finished before he tried to translate. "The vates cannot be compelled, either. Dobby and Fawkes could not tell Harry Potter sir what he was and what it meant until he began to learn it for himself, for fear of shoving him down the wrong path. To force the vates to make a choice before his time is to destroy the vates. But now you have seen the nets, and Fawkes has felt your horror at them. And a vates must hate compulsion with all his soul." Dobby nodded at him, as though to say that that part was self-evident. Harry nodded back, though he was less confident on that score. On the bad days, he still wanted the reassuring security of his phoenix web, for all that he knew he would fight anyone who tried to cast it on him again, because it would make things so much simpler. "Many other wizards have said they would be a vates. But they stumbled on the path, and decided to use compulsion to achieve their ends, or they liked compulsion enough that they could not give it up." Dobby hesitated, then added reluctantly, "Or the magical creatures pushed them too hard, and they ended up choosing to act as vates out of a sense of duty and obligation. The vates must choose, always. He must make decisions. He must not flinch from choices. And he must be free will."

Harry let out a shaky breath. "Is Dumbledore a vates?" he asked. "My m—the Muggle who bore me once said that he made the decisions that no one else could make, the hard decisions of sacrifice and war."

"Dumbledore could have been a vates," Dobby said. "But he compelled others, and told himself it was well."

So I won't be able to lie to myself, either, if I do this, Harry thought. I will have to be absolutely honest. I will have to know when I might make excuses for my shortcomings, when I'm doing things just because they're easy and not because they're right, when I'm

protesting too much and taking too much blame on myself. I'll have to read myself out loud to myself all the time, with never a lapse.

It sounded, Harry had to admit to himself, really fucking terrifying.

And I can't do it, he realized with a sigh. I still lie to myself about plenty of things. Draco and Snape say so, all the time, and I suppose they would know better than I would.

He explained that to Dobby, who nodded as he listened. Under the light of phoenix fire, Harry found himself thinking, the house elf looked neither silly nor stupid. There was a light of his own in his eyes, one that Harry thought would go out when he finished his explanation. But Dobby only grinned up at him.

"A vates is not being," he said. "A vates is not a vates only once, and then never again. A vates chooses again and again every day of his life, and makes some wrong choices, but always comes back to the right path."

"It's a thorny path," Harry muttered.

Fawkes crooned at him.

"Fawkes says that there are roses among the thorns." Dobby had his hands clasped in front of him. "Fawkes says that Harry Potter sir must not choose to help elves and phoenixes and others out of duty, but only because he wants to. And it must be a choice. Harry Potter is not all of a vates right now. He may be in the future." He made a gesture at Harry. "But first he must stop lying, as he said, and he must be free of his own webs."

Surprised, Harry touched his temple. "Do you mean the phoenix web?"

"And others," said Dobby, pointing insistently at Harry.

Startled, Harry looked down. He hadn't noticed the webs cutting through his own body, seeming to run in and out of, and tangle with, the ones in the Forbidden Forest beyond. He didn't recognize them.

They were a deep, sullen red, not a color the phoenix web had achieved even in the fullness of its power. He rested a hand on one, and felt a faint sensation of heat, but nothing else. "What are they?" he asked.

"Barriers that Harry Potter sir has put on himself," Dobby said, sounding sad. "Barriers that he has not chosen, barriers that he has not thought about. Barriers of fear." He met Harry's eyes. "Barriers that Harry Potter has reinforced with his magic, because he cannot bear the thought of certain things being true."

Harry closed his eyes and turned his head away. It was true that there were things he did not want to think about. But to hear that he had used his magic on himself, and that he hadn't even been aware of it...

It stunned him.

He took a deep breath, and asked another question that had been drifting in the back of his head since Dobby began to explain what a vates was. "Does this have to be the most important thing in the world to me, once I begin to do it?"

"Not has to," said Dobby. "Never must, or has to, or compelled to be. Only want and will."

Harry nodded. "But a vates concentrating on other duties wouldn't be one that you wanted as your unbinder," he said.

Dobby shook his head.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Then I don't see how I can be. You know how much of my focus goes to my brother. He's the most important thing in the world to me, Dobby. I would care more about him than others. I would sacrifice some of the magical creatures for his safety and happiness." He wondered if this was being honest with himself. Honesty often involves a good deal of ugliness, he thought, memories of the incident with the Muggle once again filling his mind. "I love him too much. I'm sorry. I don't think I would make a very good vates."

He offered a weak smile and opened his eyes. He almost thought Dobby would be gone in his disappointment, and Fawkes, too. But the phoenix remained, a warm, content presence on his shoulder, and Dobby still stared at him intently.

“Becoming,” said Dobby. “Harry Potter sir can become the vates, even if he is not that right now. He can change. Unless he thinks that he will never change?”

Harry shuddered. “After everything that’s happened since first year, I can’t say that,” he muttered. “But are you sure that you want to wait around for me to, possibly, become the unbinder that you need so much? You could be wasting a lot of time on me, when someone else would be a better candidate.”

“There are no better candidates,” said Dobby imperiously. “Harry Potter sir is the best since Dumbledore failed us.” He gave a brief shudder of his own and pulled on his ears. “And the D-Dark Lord was never an option.”

Harry tilted his head. “Is it only powerful wizards? Wouldn’t someone like Connor serve you just as well, if it weren’t for his liking compulsion so much?”

“Powerful wizards,” said Dobby.

“But we’re the ones who can compel others most easily,” said Harry.

Fawkes gave a twist of his neck and a bubbling trill that ran up and down the scale. Dobby gave Harry a smile as he translated. “Fawkes knows this. We all know this. The power that makes Harry Potter sir able to be vates is what makes him dangerous. And it keeps him safe from others. Others cannot compel Harry Potter.”

“They can try,” muttered Harry, thinking about Dumbledore, and Tom Riddle’s possession. Then he lapsed into thought again, while Dobby and Fawkes watched him expectantly.

If he took this gauntlet up, so much would have to change. He would have to think about other people as more important than Connor was. There were some people he would have to fight against instead of forgive, he knew, and he didn't like the thought of that. He had no idea in the world how to free magical creatures without trampling on the free will of wizards, and no idea how to persuade or coax wizards along without trampling on the free will of magical creatures. And what would happen if, say, giants or Dementors caused something harmful to happen when they were freed? On the other hand, could he really justify freeing only some of the magical creatures, the ones that might be harmless to wizards?

My life's never been simple, granted, but this would be the most complex thing I've ever done. And...I can't do it right now. My life is still Connor. He's still the important one.

"I can't do it right now," he said. Fawkes gave a prompt, impatient chirp, and Dobby translated as promptly.

"Harry Potter sir can wait. But Harry Potter sir had not thought about the webs since his night in the fire, had not looked for them. Dobby and Fawkes wanted to make sure Harry Potter sir did not forget."

Harry nodded. "I don't see how I can forget, now," he said. Fawkes uttered another croon that Dobby didn't translate, probably because he figured there was no need for it.

"Harry Potter sir is welcome to ask Dobby questions at any time," said Dobby, and bowed slightly. "Dobby's webs are weaker than others, because Dobby was born in an odd way, and then one of his old masters was odd and tried to free him. So Dobby can answer questions, and come from his masters at times to answer them."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said. He was trying to figure out when he might be ready to ask more questions. He had the pushing feeling that he should try to ask them immediately, that it was important that the magical creatures be freed at once, but if he did that, then he was not being a vates. Dobby had said he could not feel it as a duty. It had to be a decision.

But then how am I ever going to do it? Duty and sacrifice are the ways I think of things.

He let Dobby Apparate him back to his bed, and nodded to return his farewell. It wasn't far from dawn, at least from the glimpse he'd got of the sky, and that meant it wasn't worth it to try and return to sleep. He lay with his arms folded behind his head instead, and Fawkes asleep near the edge of the pillow.

He kept trying to imagine the wizarding world without house elves, and couldn't do it. Then he tried to imagine it with predatory or feral house elves instead of tame ones, and couldn't do it. Maybe that was yet another part of the problem: if he wanted hope for the future, he would have to learn what it looked like first. Right now, his mind was a blank.

Harry put the thoughts away when he heard the other boys stirring. He had other obligations to attend to today, and the first of them was waiting for the sweep of a great horned owl's wings across the Slytherin table.

Halfway through breakfast, Harry became aware that he wasn't the only one awaiting the appearance of Lucius's owl. Pansy and Millicent murmured together as they often did, but paused and waited expectantly whenever the shadow of a post owl crossed the plates. Blaise jumped now and then, as though he'd let his attention wander from the windows to his food for too long. Draco just appeared tense and unhappy.

"Your father will choose the perfect gift," Harry reassured him, and Draco simply looked at him.

"I know, Harry," he said. "That's the problem."

Finally, when the suspense had built almost to breaking point, Julius came through the window. Then he took his time circling. Harry heard mutters of agitation from around him; even some of the older Slytherins had risen to their feet and craned their necks towards him, which made Harry wonder when they'd taken an interest in the things a lowly third-year did.

Julius finally hurtled down to land precisely in front of Harry. His eyes fixed him and wouldn't let him move. The leg he thrust out with the bundle attached to it almost scraped the back of Harry's hand with his claws.

Harry inclined his head, losing the sensation of being a mouse, and retrieved the bundle without looking away from Julius. The owl continued to stare hard at him for the next moment. Then he rose and gathered speed and power, traveling from the far end of the Hall to the windows as though someone had thrown him from a slingshot.

The bundle was slender enough, and long enough, that Harry wondered if it contained a wand. But he wouldn't find out until he unwrapped it, so he did.

A blade tumbled to the table, making a dull thump as it landed. Harry picked it up, careful not to touch the edge, or the green jewel in the hilt. It was a knife—a skinning knife, about ten inches long. Harry studied the edge with intent care, catching a subtle glimmer now and then, as though the maker had put diamonds among the steel. Then he examined the jewel.

It was in the shape of a hangman's noose.

Harry had the inkling, then, of what this was. He didn't quite dare to look at Draco's pale face. Instead, he took Lucius's neatly folded letter from the bundle. It was far longer than the note he'd sent with the last vernal gift.

Mr. Potter:

When one powerful wizard allies with another, it is often to repair mistakes made in the past between the two of them, or between their two families. The Malfoy family has no especial quarrel with the Potter family, though we have always despised them. I suspect you may be wondering why I began this truce-dance.

I began this dance to ally with you, Harry Potter, not your family. As time passes by, and I observe what has become of your coward

father, your weak brother, your Mudblood of a mother, I am more sure than ever that I have made the right decision.

What I cannot understand is why you have taken so little justice from your family in return for the way they have treated you. Depriving the woman who bore you of magic hardly counts. Under the old laws, you could have demanded her death, and the death of everyone else in your family, as recompense. They bound you, a powerful wizard. The stronger the magic of the wronged, the more justice he is entitled to. And you are the most powerful wizard now living.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was sure that wasn't true. Dumbledore could still overmatch him, and Voldemort's power was a fearful and awesome thing. He wondered if Lucius was simply trying to flatter him, and, if so, why he thought Harry would be susceptible to that particular brand of flattery.

This knife is a way to insure that you may take justice from your family. When you give it a name, it will listen to you. When you command the knife by name to take those who should have loved you and did not from you, it will sever the bonds that tie you to your family, whether they are of affection, magic, or blood. From that moment forward, you are free. You may use this blade to stop yourself from loving your weakling of a brother, your coward of a father, your Mudblood of a mother. You may use it to cut yourself from their family, and then no force in the wizarding world, including the Ministry, will be able to claim that you legally belong to them. And you may use it to sever whatever bonds and limits living around them has put your magic within.

Merry first day of spring, Mr. Potter. I eagerly await your response, and to see what you what will do with your newfound freedom.

Lucius Malfoy.

Draco was leaning over his shoulder, reading the letter. His hand tightened convulsively on Harry's elbow. Then he pulled back and stared at him with his mouth open.

"Your father is a bastard, Draco," said Harry conversationally.

"You could be free, Harry," Draco whispered. "And he gave you a priceless gift. I know what that knife is. It's been in the Malfoy family for centuries. We used it to cut ourselves free from marriage alliances that didn't work out, when the families we'd married into turned against us. I know that it works. I've heard the stories. Think, Harry! You could be free. This is the greatest gift that he could have given you." Draco's face shone like the moon.

Harry glared at the knife. It shone dully at him. Harry wondered if it was aware even now, unnamed. It felt as though it were watching him.

"I'm never going to use it," said Harry, and swept the knife and the letter off the table and into his robe pockets, not caring that he almost cut his hand with the edge. "I don't want—that's obscene, Draco, that something exists which can cut those ties."

And you want to do it. Part of you wants to do it.

Harry acknowledged that, and stepped over the acknowledgment. Just because he wanted to use it did not mean he would. He was very certain on that point. The knife was obscene, and his desire to use it was obscene. One couldn't just sever love like that.

Or perhaps he could, but that didn't mean he should.

"But, Harry—" Draco whined, following him.

Harry shut his ears. He was not going to listen. He had a reconciliation with his brother to look forward to.

Step, and step, and step, and then Harry completed the climb to the Owlery. He stood there for a moment, listening to the rustle of the birds and the ruffle of feathers. He looked through the window, and nodded to see the sun just touching the horizon.

Sunset, in a sky so deep a blue it looked almost green.

On the vernal equinox.

He'd kept his word, and not sought Connor out during the weeks between the delivery of his message and the time of their meeting. It remained to be seen if Connor would keep his side of the bargain.

"Hello, Harry," said Connor's voice from behind him, calm and controlled.

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face his brother. "Hello, Connor."

Chapter Thirty: Choose, Harry

Harry wondered for a long moment if he should begin the conversation, or let his brother speak. Connor seemed content to wait and let him decide, his face turned a gentle gold by the light of sunset through the window.

Harry didn't know what his brother's main purpose in coming here was, though—reconciliation, or something else. Given that Connor didn't know the dances, he thought it might be something else. In the end, he waited. Let him be in control of the situation, he thought, his eyes watching the way Connor's gaze darted at and then flickered away from him. I think he needs the confidence.

Connor finally let out a deep breath and met Harry's eyes.

"I was really angry about what you did to Mum," he began.

Shaking in his voice, but past tense. Harry cocked his head. Does that mean he has moved closer to forgiving me, after all?

"I didn't know what you meant about a ritual." Connor managed to make his voice apologetic and defensive, both at once. "So I looked it up, and I talked with Ron about pureblood dances." He wrinkled his nose. "He told me that you could do things I never knew you could do. I don't like most of them. But he also told me that what happened to Mum was right. She couldn't have lost her magic unless she did something really awful to you."

Connor folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "So tell me what she did to you, Harry. I'm waiting."

Harry let out his breath by degrees. Thank Merlin. It seems he's willing to listen instead of punching me this time.

"She trained me from the time I was a child, from right after Voldemort's attack, to watch over you and guard you," Harry began. He'd had time to think over how he would say this, since all his attempts to explain before had failed, and was confident that this speech would make the most sense to Connor. "But my magic

frightened her. When I was four, she had Dumbledore cast a phoenix web on me.”

“She told me about it,” said Connor. “But it was just to keep you from hurting other people.”

“No,” said Harry, as gently as he could. “It was more than that. It was to keep me loving you, to consider your welfare before my own, to make me love you and care for you in ways that I wouldn’t have if not for it.”

Connor shook his head. “But you’ve always done that, Harry. You’ve always protected me. Remember the troll and the Lestranges in first year? Why did that make you want to take Mum’s magic away?”

Eyes looking away from me, Harry noted. I think that he does have some inkling of the truth, after all, but doesn’t want to confront it.

“I only wanted to protect you so much because of the web, Connor,” he said. “And my training. Mum told me I could never have a life of my own. I always had to put you first.”

Connor stared at him. Then he asked, as if testing it, “No friends of your own?”

Harry shrugged. “I think she mentioned once that I could share your friends. I was certainly to make myself agreeable to them, since they would be your friends and important to you, and fulfill your needs for companionship. But she never envisioned me having friends that were only mine and not yours.” He wondered, for the first time, if that would have been a bad thing about his going into Gryffindor. Would he have managed to make friends on his own? He had no idea, since being in the same House as Connor would have meant being far more constantly in his shadow, under his influence, and compared constantly (and probably unfavorably) with him in the eyes of the other Gryffindors.

“No getting married?” Connor asked.

Harry shook his head. “How could I do that? If a wizard gets married, he should love his spouse as he loves nobody else. And I would be loving you, watching over you, protecting you. I should protect your spouse and your children, too. I wouldn’t have time for a lover or a family.”

“What about a life after the War?” Connor whispered.

“I mostly didn’t expect to survive the War,” said Harry. “After it, if I did, then I would be engaged in getting you whatever you wanted. If you wanted to be Minister, I would support you. If you wanted to have a quiet life completely separated from the world—after all, I don’t know if the Boy-Who-Lived would ever get any private time after his defeat of Voldemort—then I would create wards that completely cut you off from everyone else, stronger than the wards on Godric’s Hollow. If you wanted a life as a star Quidditch player, I’d arrange that, too.”

Connor kicked at the stones of the floor, scowling. “But I would want to become a star Quidditch player on my own,” he said.

Harry nodded. “And if that was what you wanted, then I would stay out of the way, and only make sure that you got to practices on time and did other things that wouldn’t jeopardize your chances.”

Connor put his hands in his robe pockets. “I still don’t see why any of this leads to your taking magic from Mum.”

“If it weren’t for Tom Riddle, I wouldn’t have,” Harry admitted, noting with a frown how Connor flinched at the name. Tom Riddle was only a fragment of Voldemort. If he flinches from the memory, then how can he face the whole? “He tore up my mind. He released the phoenix web. And then Sylarana died last year, in the Chamber—” His voice wavered, and he looked away from Connor. “And she was so entwined with my web that she shredded it when she died. I had to rebuild my mind. That’s why I spent so much time with the Malfoys last summer. I still have the phoenix web now, or part of it, but I can see around it, and I know that I don’t ever want to go back under it again.

"Mum pretended to reconcile with me, and then cast the phoenix web on me again. I couldn't take that. I stripped her of her magic. That way, she can never cast the spell again."

There was a long silence. Harry listened to the wind blow around the stones of the Owlery, and fought the sadness that came with reliving the loss of Sylarana. How ridiculous was he, to want to mourn when he was on the verge of reconciling with his brother, the one person he loved most in life?

Then Connor said, "But, Harry, I don't think that what she did to you deserved the loss of her magic."

Harry looked back at him. His brother's eyes were earnest, shining, and his words came slowly, as though he were stepping over the thoughts that he needed to think like scattered sticks.

"Don't you see?" Connor asked, with a sharp gesture. "She was trying to make you a better person. She was trying to make you a Gryffindor. She was trying to make sure that you knew how to love other people, that you knew what courage and duty and sacrifice were like, that you could protect me until I was ready to protect myself."

"Yes," Harry acknowledged unwillingly.

"So you must have misunderstood," Connor said. "You thought she'd done something really wrong, and the ritual believed you and took her magic. But she hadn't, so that means that she deserves her magic back!" His eyes were brilliant, and he surged forward to grip Harry's arm. "We can have a family again! We'll get Dad to come back and stop being such a git, and then—"

Harry stepped gently backwards. It was a small motion, but enough to quell the smile on Connor's face. "No?" he whispered.

"No," Harry repeated. "The justice ritual doesn't work like that, Connor. She must have done something really wrong, objectively wrong, for me to use it and have it work. If I'd only believed that it was wrong, and used the ritual anyway, it would have eaten up my magic. I know that she's wrong. I know that she hurt me. It doesn't matter what she

thought she was trying to do. I can't give her her magic back, and I don't want to. I want to stay away from her."

"You don't understand," said Connor, his voice sharp with disappointment and anger. "Mum told me about this. She said that she regretted what she'd done. She knew you would be angry, but she had the best of intentions. She wants you back, Harry. She wants us all to be a family again, the way we were at Christmas—"

"When she was ignoring me?" Harry asked. "When Dad was ignoring me?"

"They were doing that because you cast a spell." The red of fury was mounting in Connor's cheeks.

"Yes, I know," said Harry, "and now she wants her magic back, which can't happen. She doesn't really want me in the family, Connor. She wants someone who can be controlled. She wants the person she made me into."

"But that is you, Harry," said Connor. "You do protect me, and you do love me, and does it really matter if the web broke? The other things are still part of you. You can protect me even better if you give Mum her magic back. Then she can guard me during the times when she's there and you're not."

"I do still love you," said Harry. "I do still want to protect you. But it matters to me how she tried to get me to do that, Connor. It matters very much."

"Why?"

Harry wondered if he could explain it. As he had told Snape and Draco, it was still hard. He could imagine Draco in this situation, and the howls of outrage that he would release at Lucius Malfoy if he'd put a phoenix web on his son. He could imagine Connor in that situation; the very idea caused a hot anger at the Muggle to build up. He could even imagine Hermione in this situation, though since her parents were Muggles they'd probably have been beating her instead, and how he would make sure that they understood what happened

when a powerful wizard got angry in the defense of his friends. But put himself in the same situation, and his anger diminished. He'd survived, after all. It was the training, if not the phoenix web, that had made him into this person that Draco claimed to be friends with, that Snape had become guardian to, that Lucius Malfoy had chosen to truce-dance with, that the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons had bound themselves to. Could he really complain about that? Did he have the right? Would any of them have looked at him twice if he were ordinary? Would anyone care at all?

Harry did not believe so.

But Connor was waiting for an explanation.

Harry used the arguments that Snape and Draco had used with him. "Because she didn't have my true consent to do that," he said. "Choice is important, Connor. She started training me so young that I never had the chance to really say yes. And then Dumbledore put the phoenix web on me when I was four. So my mind was changed and twisted and warped. Would you like having your mind changed and twisted and warped?" He thought he might win the argument by appealing to Connor's empathy, which Harry knew he had. He had watched Connor rescue butterflies from drowning in the small pond behind their house. He had watched the way that Connor kept offering compassion to Sirius when Harry himself was incapable of doing so. Even Connor's love for their mother was a sign of it.

Connor blinked. "Of course not," he said. "But I'm me now, and I'm thirteen. And you're you, and you grew up with the phoenix web. Why can't things just go back to the way they were?"

"They can't, Connor," said Harry, despite his own longing to have his simple, clear, happy life back. "I'm sorry."

Connor turned abruptly away from him and stared out the window. Harry watched his back. He wanted so badly to say something to make things better. He didn't know what he could say, though. He didn't really believe in the things that Snape and Draco would have said. Neither could he tolerate going back under the web.

It will have to be his move, Harry thought, and waited.

Connor turned back around at last, and faced him. Harry met his eyes.

"I saw Mum when the ritual was done," Connor began. "I've never seen such an awful sight.

"She was lying in the middle of the floor. She raised her head when she saw Dad and me, and started crying." Connor drew in a sharp, nervous breath. "She tried to Accio one of the cloths on the far side of the kitchen. She couldn't. All her magic was gone.

"Dad rushed to her, and demanded to know what had happened. She whispered something about a box and her magic, and you. I saw Dad's face freeze. I didn't know then that he would leave. I knew that he remembered you, and he thought the ritual meant something bad."

Connor took a single step forward, eyes never leaving Harry's. Harry didn't think he'd blinked since beginning his litany. Harry went on listening. He had to know what had happened. Besides, Connor probably hadn't told anyone else this. He needed a chance to purge the poison, to pour out the sorrowful tale into willing ears.

"Dad carried her to bed. She couldn't walk. Her whole body had been raided." Connor raised his voice. "No, raped. You raped her, Harry."

Harry held himself still. He knew that couldn't be true. The ritual was the foundation of his sanity. He trusted it to be right.

So it didn't matter that the words went home like scythes. He could still listen to this. Connor needed him to listen to this.

"She cried for the first day," Connor whispered. "And then Dad left. He left on Christmas evening, and I still have no idea where he went. Sirius was there, and he took care of Mum and me.

"She raged for the second day. She wanted her magic back. It was the most horrible thing I've ever seen, Harry.

"She got a letter from Dumbledore on the third day, promising he'd talk to you. She cried again after that.

"But then..."

Connor took another step forward. Harry became aware that they were standing less than a foot apart. Connor's eyes were very deep, the hazel more intense than Harry had ever seen it, swarming with flakes of gold and green.

"Then," Connor whispered, "she changed her mind. She said that she wanted to have you back. That's what she wanted, more than her magic or Dad or a happy family Christmas. She wanted you. She wanted the son who'd hurt her. She has the greatest capacity to forgive that I've ever known, Harry."

Connor lifted his head. He was shaking lightly. "I'm afraid of you," he said. "I'm afraid of your magic, and the way you tore Mum apart, and the way you trample on all the lives around you. But I promised Mum that I'd talk to you, and that I'd try to get you back for her. Will you come back?"

Harry felt as though he were falling through space. The world around him was too large, too endless. He knew that he could give Connor back the family he'd dreamed of. The broken remains of the phoenix web pulsed in his head, urging him to give in. Everything could be back to normal. He'd wanted that, when he had spoken with Lily about his dream of a happy family.

And what about Draco? And Snape? And Remus? And Peter? And the purebloods? And all the magical creatures?

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, Connor," he whispered. "I can't. The ritual is forever. I can't give her back her magic, and I can't give her back the son she had. I don't trust her, and I think that she sent you mainly because she wants everything the same as it was, not because she really loves me. She's afraid of me, too."

Connor's breath hitched. He closed his eyes. Harry wondered if he felt like he was falling through space as well.

Then he opened his eyes, and his gaze was incredibly direct, clamping on Harry's eyes like iron bands.

"I promised that I would get you back for her," said Connor. "I would talk to you and give you the chance. But since you're refusing, then I can't trust that you'll ever see sense. So." He took another breath, this one seeming to penetrate more deeply into his chest. "Come back with me, Harry."

Harry felt his brother's compulsion leap and coil in his head, far smoother than it had been last year, when he first felt it. It neatly dodged most of the Occlumency shields that he raised before it, aiming for the phoenix web. Once it joined with that, Harry knew, it could probably convince him.

He lunged backwards, pulling with all his will to remain free, to destroy the tendril of compulsion in his head, the desire to obey Connor's order.

The phoenix web shredded, broke apart, dissolved, and was gone.

Harry gasped. The gasp traveled through him, expanding like a cloud in new directions, finding new spaces and filling them up with new, soft fog and mist.

This wasn't the sudden sundering that had marked the end of his ability to trust his mother, nor yet the sensation of triumph and wings that he had encountered when the gray Dementor freed his magic. Instead, the world swung around, and around, and then Harry realized he stood atop the Owlery, and saw in a thousand directions.

His sight sparkled with clarity. He had never really seen before, he thought in wonder. He was seeing now.

He could see how the stones fit together, how they blended at the edges into strength, how they rested on each other in sturdiness, how they clung together to resist the blast of the wind. He could see the tracks that owls would probably take when they flew out the window,

and, if he concentrated, he could see the bindings that ran from owls to wizards, and the other way, too.

He saw how beautiful those small and ordinary things were, and he was filled with wonder.

He turned and looked at his brother.

Memories suffocated him, blowing up in his head like thick, choking fog.

He remembered how Hermione had looked when she stamped out of Trelawney's Tower on the day Trelawney had given the prophecy. His brother had spoken sharply to her then, said something that Hermione found unforgivable, and they hadn't yet made up. Hermione was waiting, bristling, offended, for Connor to make the first move, and since he had given the insult, he really should have. But he hadn't.

Was that the act of a compassionate, gentle, giving person who only wanted the best for everybody?

No.

He remembered the way that Connor had attacked him last year, when he had thought that Harry was the next Dark Lord, and he was discovering his own compulsion gift and his fear of it. Was that the act of a war leader, courageously facing his enemy the best way he knew how, on a battlefield that would match them equally?

No. It was the act of a frightened child.

He remembered the way that Connor had offered him the Marauder's Map that summer and suggested that Harry could let his magic work on it, or create copies of it, so as to use up the power that raced restlessly around him. Was that the act of someone completely irredeemable?

No. It was the act of a brother who was concerned for me, and for the safety of other people in the house, too, since my parents didn't even remember me to defend themselves against.

He remembered the way that Connor had woken up at his bedside after the events of last year, after spending Merlin knew who many hours there, and told him about his possession by Tom Riddle. Was that the act of a coward who would never know courage in his life, who had been placed in Gryffindor House solely because of arrogant rashness?

No. It was the act of someone who knew he was wrong, and was brave enough to confess the mistake to me.

So many things I didn't know, Harry thought in wonder, and had the feeling that he was truly seeing his brother for the first time, not making excuses for him, not forgetting the things he had done that were worthy of praise, able to evaluate and judge. Had the phoenix web that bound him to brotherly duty really bound that much of himself up, all his critical faculties where Connor was concerned, all his thoughts? It seemed so, and yet Harry could hardly believe it. It seemed so obvious, now that he was looking. Now that he was seeing.

He became aware that Connor was staring at him. He wondered if he was waiting for some reaction to his compulsion, or if he simply didn't know what had happened. Harry had no idea how much time had passed since his eyes had opened.

He isn't perfect. He isn't unforgivable. He's nowhere near ready to become the Boy-Who-Lived, the leader we need, or at least the leader that people will expect him to be. He's human. The Muggle and Dumbledore did us both a disservice with the phoenix web. I could have helped teach him better, if they hadn't been so worried that I would turn on him or try to take his place.

But it takes more than power to be the Boy-Who-Lived. I think it takes more than power to be anything important.

Harry took a step forward, and Connor backed away, fast enough to bump his shoulders hard on the wall of the Owlery. His voice had turned hoarse when he raised a shaking hand between them.

"Don't come near me," he whispered.

Of course, Harry thought, after a moment of regarding him curiously. He's still afraid of me. He believes the lies the Muggle told him, and who knows what Sirius has been teaching him, alone in the Shrieking Shack?

"You'll have to stop the private lessons with Sirius, you know," he told Connor. "I think he's been teaching you a lot of nonsense. Slytherins aren't evil."

"Voldemort came from that House!" said Connor.

Harry shrugged. "And Dumbledore came from Gryffindor, and he was the one who bound me with the phoenix web. You can't just assign everyone to Houses and have them be good and evil that way, Connor. It would be too simple. And if it's one thing the world isn't, it's simple."

He waited for a moment. Acknowledging that yesterday, or even last night, when Dobby and Fawkes had shown him the webs in the wizarding world, would have sent him into a panic. He wanted the simple. The easy. The clear. His early life had been so clear, with the path of duty laid out before him.

But instead, he felt a wild gush of glee, and began to laugh. If things were complicated, then that meant he had more things to do, more possibilities spreading out around him, more problems for his magic to tackle. There was Connor, and the vates, and Sirius, and his family, and the tension between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and figuring out how to live now that the phoenix web was gone, and defeating Voldemort, and maybe doing things like making more friends and getting married himself someday, and the alliances with the purebloods, and reconciling with his father if he could, and deciding what to do about the werewolf in Remus, and, and, and...

The Owlery burst into brightness around him as his magic began to dance, creating several small and mad golden vortices that spun in on each other, collided, vanished in a spangle of sparks, and then came back into being again. Harry held out a hand flat, and heard himself laugh as some of the golden light formed into a winged shape that might have been a Snidget or a really tiny phoenix. He threw it out the window of the Owlery.

The sun had fully set by now, though traces of gold and green still lingered behind it. The light that rose from Harry's creation flooded the grounds and made Hogwarts look as if day had come again. Harry heard a song begin, and felt a wind rush past him and swirl out the window. The scent of roses was in his nose, and the taste of honey on his tongue. He laughed, and the sound briefly became visible as notes that sparkled and popped like bubbles. He did not think he had ever been so purely happy in his life.

He had been wrong about so many things, and caused so much harm by encouraging Connor to persist in his blindness. And he had been right about so many things, and he was going to have the chance to make up for his mistakes. He had been wrong about what being free and living in a complicated world would feel like, too.

It felt wonderful.

The golden light lofted higher, and higher still. Now it appeared as a round lump, like a lamp, in the middle of traceries stretching to the horizon that it renewed again and again. The song had grown stronger and stronger, and by now, it was a deep and booming voice singing cheerfully over Hogwarts.

Ron told me to hang up signs announcing what I intend, Harry thought, dizzy more from the exaltation than the magic, but why? I think this is a much better message.

I choose to be free. I choose to live. I choose to repair what mistakes I can, and try to learn when I can't repair them any more. And oh, I haven't stopped lying to myself and I might never do that, and learning to love Connor for the right reasons is going to take an awful lot of work, and I'm nervous and I so might fall down and fail.

I don't care. This is wonderful, being free and facing the fear. Dumbledore really ought to try it sometime.

And because he knew that, he turned his gaze on the webs that Dobby had shown him in his own body, the sullen red ones that burned like coals. Harry reached down and felt the same faint sensation of heat. He knew that he could break them, if he wanted to. It had never been a matter of power that kept them there, but his own will. He hadn't wanted to face what he had bound.

Snape's cautions echoed in his head, and Harry knew he didn't want to rush into this the way that he had rushed into shattering Remus's Obliviate. Therefore, he carefully unbound the largest web, rather as though he were unwrapping a gift.

Darkness rushed at him. Harry understood a great deal, in that moment. He did have the ability to eat other wizards' magic. He didn't know if he would ever have hurt his parents and his brother when he was a child, but he might have. The phoenix web had tied it at first, and then Harry had, because the thought horrified him so much. He suspected the red web had originated the moment he heard about the possible power at Christmas, or perhaps the time that he stole a bit of Dumbledore's magic while protecting Draco.

Well, yes, but hiding doesn't solve anything, he thought, with a mad happiness that reminded him of Gryffindors, and jumped on the ability as it tried to spread out around him and eat Connor's magic.

The darkness fought him. It was rather like riding a writhing snake, perhaps a basilisk, and that brought up memories that were just so distracting, and Harry had to fight his own tendency to think about Sylarana so that he could corral the damn thing. But he fought them. He let the memories pass through his head, and he endured beneath them.

I am the wizard, not you, he thought at his magic, as he threw bits of his own being around it—not webs, but reins. I don't want you to run wild and eat other people's magic, and so you won't.

The darkness roared and hissed and plunged. Harry was unimpressed. Just because he could eat magic didn't mean that he should, or that he was going to.

That was the lesson that Dumbledore and the Muggle never learned about me, he thought, sadly, as he bridled the damn ability and wrapped it around him. It was his. He would do what he wanted with it, not the other way around. They thought I might eat their magic. They didn't trust me to have control, so they tied me.

It made him regret, for a moment, all those years that he could have been growing, wrapped in his own magic, learning to control it, but then he sighed and gave up the regret. Time was never going to turn backwards. What he could do now was learn to grow within his magic, and make up for the time he'd lost. That was the past, and this was the future, and he was going to live.

And he was going to make sure that he saw his brother the way he really was. No one could afford the way that he'd used to see him. Connor couldn't become the Boy-Who-Lived that way, and they couldn't be normal, loving brothers that way.

Oh, Harry knew he would still make more excuses for Connor than were natural or necessary, and he knew he would probably feel some guilt, at some point when he wasn't thrumming with magic, at the way he had made excuses in the past. But he knew about it now. The phoenix web was gone, and now he could at least acknowledge the mistakes as mistakes.

He looked at Connor, and sighed when he saw his brother's horror-stricken gaze. Harry took a step closer, and held out a hand.

"Connor," he whispered.

Connor stood where he was, trembling, and then Harry saw a dark patch on his trousers, where he'd let his bladder go in his fright. And then he turned and ran away.

Harry sighed. This will still take some work.

He looked out the window, to where the light he had created and the sunset alike were fading, and couldn't help smiling. And I'm ready to do it.

Calmly, he made his way down the Owlery steps.

Chapter Thirty-One: Aftershocks

Percy Weasley lay on his bed and stared out the window of Gryffindor Tower. He supposed he should think he was lucky. Most people would think he was lucky. He was Head Boy, entitled to help the professors lord it over the other students. He was one of the best students in the school, and got his high marks with a minimum of effort. He was a pureblood wizard, and would have a job in the Ministry immediately after he left school, assuming his NEWTS were high enough—which, of course, they would be.

He had Albus Dumbledore's trust.

Percy buried his head in his pillow. That last was the heaviest burden he had to carry, like some great and fragile ball of glass. He always thought he could drop it, and it would shatter the way that his own peaceful life had shattered the summer before his sixth year, when he received his first owl from Dumbledore.

His mother had been so proud of him, getting private post from Dumbledore.

Percy did not think she would be proud of him now, given the decision he had almost, almost, almost made.

Light abruptly flared overhead, and at the same moment, Percy felt a mad itching in his shoulder blades. He sat up, scratching furiously beneath his robes, while his eyes followed the burst of gold, which renewed itself again and again, over the Forest.

He knew what it meant. Percy had felt that itching more than most of the Weasleys, and knew the different forms it took. Near Dumbledore, the itch was deep, almost savage, extending right to the bone. Near Harry, the itch was light, tickling, like the feet of many tiny spiders running over his skin. And this was Harry's power, a magic that curled like a wind and whispered what would happen if a wizard just reached out and grasped that wind.

Percy knew he never could. And he knew, too, that Dumbledore would probably want to speak to him about this display. It was part of

the duty he had almost, almost, almost made up his mind to take, and Percy didn't think the Headmaster would be able to see all of it from his office window.

So he watched, and watched, and watched, and finally the gold stopped renewing itself and the sky was calm and dark again. Percy kept on looking, just to make sure it wouldn't come back, and then stood up heavily. He opened his door and walked down the stairs to the Gryffindor common room, ignoring the speculative stares and chatter of the younger years.

He had an obligation to perform. He had duties they didn't. Once, when he was a prefect waiting to become Head Boy, that would have made him grin in excitement. He knew things that most people didn't know.

Now, the weight of all the accumulated knowledge he had that other people didn't just made his head ache. One nice thing about going to Dumbledore's office was that he actually got to dump some of it, and then his head would feel clear for a while—

Until the next time the impossible decision crept up on him. Hermione was in the middle of her Arithmancy homework when she began sneezing. She put the book down and pushed it out of the way of the dangerous droplets, intending to return to work the moment this odd attack stopped, but she kept on sneezing. She sat back on her bed and pulled out a cloth from the box of them she kept on the floor, a gift from her parents. They were always concerned that she keep things clean, and Hermione didn't have the heart to tell them that cleaning charms were more common at Hogwarts than handkerchiefs.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" The violence of her sneezing had caught Lavender's attention. She turned around with that expression of vague good will on her face that Hermione reminded herself she was lucky to get from the other girls at all. She certainly hadn't when she attended Muggle school. "Did you swallow something the wrong way?"

That's coughing, honestly, Hermione thought, but the sneezes kept her from delivering the lecture she'd like to. She wiped again and again at her nose, and finally it calmed. Hermione carefully folded the cloth and put it away, and then performed a Scourgify on the bed just in case. She'd read in Hogwarts, A History how all the students had once regularly become sick in the winters, until the professors began to teach cleaning charms in the younger years. Hermione liked to keep things safe.

Except that I don't think it's really safe, now.

She thought herself stupid for not remembering when she'd had a sudden attack of sneezing like that earlier—when Harry had unleashed his magic. She promptly scrambled up and marched towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Lavender and Parvati chorused.

Hermione ignored them as she wrenched open the door and bounded down the stairs to the common room. She didn't much care for either Lavender or Parvati. They giggled all the time. They thought too much about boys as romantic partners and not study partners. And, most of all, they thought Professor Trelawney was brilliant. Hermione would have been ashamed of herself if she'd needed any more signs to recognize them as idiots.

She reached the common room and looked around eagerly. Conversations swirled among the chairs and couches, but no one was moving towards the portrait hole. They looked as though they wanted someone to tell them what had happened, instead of finding it out for themselves.

Hermione put her nose in the air. She couldn't stand that kind of apathy. As Professor McGonagall always said, how was anyone going to learn if they didn't want to?

She stalked across the common room towards the portrait hole, but heard rushing footsteps on the stairs from the boys' room and turned to wait. Ron was running to catch up with her, his face red from the effort. Hermione nodded sharply at him and opened the portrait. She

didn't think as highly of him as she had last year, but she supposed someone had to stand beside Connor and try to keep the precious idiot from falling and hurting himself.

Ron had an almost frightened expression on his face. Hermione shook her head. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Connor and Harry were having a meeting tonight," said Ron tightly. "First day of spring, y'know."

No, Hermione thought, I don't know. She was vastly annoyed every time some casual pureblood reference made her remember that she was Muggleborn. Of course, that wouldn't stop her for long. She intended to have every nuance and ritual of pureblood culture mastered by fifth year, just in case some of it showed up on the OWLS. Then she could move on to learning every spell she might possibly need for the NEWTS. True, she would have only two years' preparation that way, but Hermione was confident that most of her spell skills were already up to OWL level.

"And?" she asked, as Ron turned towards the Owlery. Hermione followed him willingly. She only knew that the explosion of magic had been powerful, and close. She hadn't yet learned to pinpoint its direction. That was another thing she would learn, she had promised herself, and made a mental note now to add it to her private scroll of such things.

"Connor said that he wanted to reconcile with Harry," said Ron, increasing his stride as they passed a few empty classrooms and finally came to the bottom of the Owlery steps. "He wanted to use a pureblood ritual to do it. But the explosion of magic isn't part of the pureblood ritual. So—"

"Surely you're not afraid that Harry hurt Connor?" Hermione couldn't believe that. Harry was devoted to his brother—so devoted that Hermione wanted to smack him sometimes, because there was no way that anyone deserved that kind of devotion when he was being as much of a prat as Connor could be. And other people felt the same way. Hadn't Draco Bloody Malfoy actually approached her and asked

her to watch over Harry while he was in Divination, because Malfoy was afraid that Harry wouldn't defend himself against his brother?

"Maybe," said Ron. "Maybe he did it without meaning to. You don't know how strong Harry is, Hermione."

"I do too!" said Hermione indignantly. "I felt it!"

"Well, powerful wizards—" Ron began, in that lecturing tone Hermione hated. She didn't know why he had a right to lecture her. She knew a lot more than he did.

Ron didn't get a chance to finish as Connor abruptly hurtled down the Owlery steps and almost hit them. Ron grabbed their friend's elbows and steadied him, and Connor burst into hysterical sobs.

"He tried to kill me," he whispered. "I really think he would have killed me."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. Something smelled foul. She glanced down and saw the dark stain on Connor's trousers, and gave Ron a commanding look.

Luckily, Ron could understand her without words sometimes. He pulled Connor in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, talking too softly for Hermione to make out after a few steps. "Look, mate, you've had a terrible shock, and..."

Hermione pulled out her wand and waited. Now that she was thinking about it, she could feel the magic descending the steps after Connor, Harry's steps as unhurried as the steps of a prowling dragon. Maybe that was what had panicked him.

Harry came around the last turn of the stairs. He seemed mildly startled to see Hermione's wand pointed at him, but after a few moments he smiled and shook his head. Hermione, meanwhile, was fighting hard not to squint.

There wasn't really a visible aura of magic around Harry; she just felt as though there should have been. There was a shimmer of air

around him that her eyes found it hard to focus on, and his eyes shone more vividly and richly than she had ever seen them shining before, even from behind his glasses. And he looked more relaxed than Hermione remembered seeing him, too.

“Are you going to hex me?” Harry asked.

“No,” said Hermione, lowering her wand and blinking. I wonder what causes that effect around him? I don’t remember seeing it around the Headmaster, but maybe he controls it better. I’ll have to find out. “But Connor said that you’d tried to kill him, so I thought I’d best be ready.”

Harry’s face darkened, and then he said something that made Hermione sure he must be someone else Polyjuiced into Harry. “Connor’s a prat, sometimes,” he said.

“Who are you, and what have you done with Harry Potter?” Hermione demanded, pointing her wand at him. “Are you Draco Malfoy?”

Harry gave her a small smile and shook his head again. “No, Hermione,” he said, and that reassured her a bit, because Malfoy only called her “Granger,” and then with a twist in his voice that made it obvious that he was fighting hard not to say “Mudblood.” “Just Harry finally seeing the truth.”

Hermione blinked, and felt a wash of pure wonder overcome her.

“You’ll have to tell me what that’s like,” she said, putting her wand back in her sleeve. “I don’t think I can learn it from books.”

“It’s brilliant,” said Harry, his voice soft as starlight.

Hermione nodded. “But how brilliant?”

Harry laughed. Hermione decided that she could stand not getting the answers to a few questions, since she was hearing that laugh. Albus stared out the window of his office as the last of Harry’s light-show died. He continued watching for long moments before he finally moved over and allowed himself to take his seat.

For the first time in years, he felt old. Not merely weary of battle, not wondering where he would find the strength to fight, but actively aged, and almost ready to think of death as something other than the rest he would take when the wizarding world was finally, absolutely, safe.

He sat behind his desk for a moment and stared at the far side of the office, at Fawkes's empty perch and some of the silver instruments that wouldn't see use for a long time, if ever. He felt, he concluded, as he had the day he realized Fawkes wasn't coming back to him.

One of the three possible pathways for the future had just vanished into smoke. Harry would not fall back under the phoenix web. He would not make everything be as it had been, the safe and secure and predictable future that Albus had envisioned from the moment he heard the prophecy. He would tear further and further away from Connor and the problem would worsen, or...

Or he would hear the prophecy, someday, and realize what it could mean, and become an equal and an ally. Albus did not dare let him be anything other than an ally, not when Harry had that much power, but he knew this was a wizard whom he had bound, conditioned, and encouraged to stay bound and conditioned. Harry was sure to demand a heavy sacrifice of him before he agreed to aid the war effort in one of the two ways that they would have to have him.

Regret struck through him, keener than a lightning bolt, sharper than the thorns of the path he'd once tried—and failed—to walk.

For the first time since the beginning of the First War with Voldemort, since he realized what young Tom Riddle had become, Albus found himself unable to put the regret aside. He wished things could have gone differently, with a sourness that tainted the back of his throat. Even knowing that things could not have gone differently, that what was done was done, he still wished for it.

He pushed the thoughts out of his head when he heard a knock on the door. That would be young Percy Weasley, one of the few Albus still thought he could trust to watch out for the wizarding world before themselves. Albus knew he had to look calm, contained, and regal. Otherwise, Percy might start doubting and falter. He was still unsure

that this course really was the best one, however much he wanted to help the Headmaster. He needed a strong leader.

They all do, Albus thought. They will be watching me in the wake of this, trying to see if I am frightened of Harry, if I am making frantic overtures to him. They will all be watching—the Ministry, the students, the professors, those impossible purebloods who seem to think that a child can lead them.

I must give them a show.

The regret was drowned. The thorns were pulled free from his flesh and thrown away. Regrets or not, he had a path to follow.

Albus lifted his head and put on his best smile. “Come in, Mr. Weasley.”

Luna didn’t know why everyone around her was chattering about the blast of magic. It was perfectly obvious that the blast of magic was Harry’s, and that he was fighting a Wrackspurt. Wrackspurts had an interest in him. He’d been possessed by one last year, and had done some awful things under its influence. So, if he was fighting now, another one was trying to possess him.

I should make a necklace for him, Luna thought, and reached down to the basket beside her chair. She kept feathers in there, and small scraps of parchment, and stems from quills, and bits of broken inkwells, and Knuts no one else wanted, and many other treasures that people discarded without noticing the lingering magic in them. She sorted carefully through her treasures now, and found an empty piece of string and some small green scraps of parchment. She nodded. Those would be good. Wrackspurts were scared of small green scraps of parchment.

“Hey, Loony, what you doin’?”

Luna glanced up. It was poor Gorgon, a fifth-year student with a speech impediment. That was the only reason he could have for mispronouncing her name each and every time. “Making a necklace,”

she said, and held up the string so that he could see. "There are Wrackspurts up in the Owlery."

Gorgon snorted and opened his mouth to say something else, but Jones, who always followed him around, shook his shoulder roughly. "Mate," he whispered. "That explosion came from up in the Owlery."

Gorgon paled dramatically, but it still took him a moment to work out the implications. Luna frowned lightly as she strung the parchment scraps along the thread, the movements so familiar she could do it by feel. She didn't understand why Gorgon acted stupid when he wasn't. He couldn't be stupid, or he wouldn't be in Ravenclaw.

"So that means that Potter—" began Gorgon.

"Yeah," said Jones. "He's more powerful than ever, mate, and Loony—I mean Luna—here is his friend." He jerked his head at Luna.

They both stared at her. Luna didn't know why. Her fingers kept making the necklace while she stared back, calmly. People were always looking at her. She was used to it. She would have gone mad long ago, if she wasn't.

Gorgon licked his lips and swallowed. "You'll—you'll tell Potter that we didn't mean you any harm?" he asked. "That we were just playing?"

"When did you ever intend me harm?" said Luna, and knotted the end of the necklace. She considered the string for a moment, and decided that it could use a few of the swallow feathers she'd found lying beside the lake. She stooped down and got them from her basket.

"Right, right," said Jones, driving an elbow into Gorgon's ribs. Luna thought he was trying to get Gorgon to shut up, and nodded. That's probably the best course. Then he won't say inane things. "Just tell Potter that we've seen the error of our ways and we wish him the very best of luck, all right?"

Luna shrugged at him. "All right. But Harry won't have the best of luck if I can't get these swallow feathers on the necklace just the way I want them."

"Right, right." Jones dragged Gorgon away, and left her alone. Luna looked around, and noted that most of the people in the Ravenclaw common room were trying not to look at her, and failing. She shrugged, and carefully finished the necklace for Harry.

I wonder if they'll be afraid of him? she thought for the first time as she admired the finished necklace.

Then she frowned and shook her head. How could anyone be afraid of him? He's not going to hurt people. I don't understand why so many people don't see that.

Of course, most people refused to admit that Heliopaths and Wrackspurts were real, too. Luna supposed that some of that was fear of what the Ministry would do to them if they admitted it, but some of it could be the same reason they were afraid of Harry—they thought something might happen if they drew their attention.

People are very strange, Luna thought, as she put down the necklace and picked up the book on Arithmancy she'd been reading again. So few of them see the world for what it is.

Remus jolted out of a doze as the magic swept the castle. He could smell it, which was more than he'd been able to do in a long time. He dazedly lifted his head from the pile of second-year essays and blinked at nothing.

The wolf inside him snarled and muttered its hate. By that alone, Remus suspected the magic came from Harry and not Albus. The wolf approved of Albus, for the same reason it approved of Sirius: it could sense kindred in them.

Remus ignored it as he sniffed, and his nose reported to him what the wolf wouldn't. This magic was joyous, fresh, and smelled like green shoots pushing up through mud—like the beginning of spring, in fact. Remus felt his body twitch. He wished he could transform into a beast

that wouldn't kill people and run through the castle, exercising his elation through his muscles.

He stood and rapidly made his way to the door of his office, shutting the wolf up when it protested. It was not yet the night of the full moon, and he had more control when he was further away from it. He locked the wolf behind a door he'd learned about long ago, and stepped out into the hallway.

He saw Sirius, hastening away from him towards the top of the school, and called out, "Sirius! Wait!" Surely, if anything could reconcile them, it was this, Remus thought. The air smelled like spring. It breathed possibility. Surely Sirius would realize that any magic that felt like this couldn't possibly be Dark?

Sirius turned around, and Remus recoiled. Sirius's face was a mixture of desperation and fear.

"What do you want, Lupin?" Sirius snarled, the sound of a dog in the back of his voice. The wolf whined in appreciation, and Remus shut it up again. "I have to go find Connor. I think Harry must have done something awful to him. They were having a meeting tonight, you know. The vernal equinox. A reconciliation meeting. I'd been training Connor hard for it."

Remus felt his eyes widen. "Sirius—you didn't advise Connor to use compulsion on Harry, did you?"

Sirius glanced sullenly away from him.

Remus strode forward and grabbed his old friend's shoulders, shaking him slightly. He could, if he concentrated, forget that the last time he'd been this close to Sirius, he'd been trying to kill him. "Sirius, wake up. Harry isn't going to be a slave, not ever again. I would think that you would welcome that and cheer him on. You were enslaved by your family's expectations for so long, until you ran away and hid with James at Lux Aeterna. Why won't you feel grateful that he managed to escape, and even younger than you did?"

"You don't understand anything, Lupin." Sirius's voice didn't sound like him, low and chill and dusty. He wrenched himself free from Remus's hands. "You don't understand anything of what I have to do, what Albus has asked me to do, what it means that—" He cut himself off, and hurried up the hallway again.

Remus watched him go, actually limping slightly, as though he favored his left side. Around his neck, the golden chain of the ornament Dumbledore had given him clinked and shone.

Remus found that he was no longer quite as joyful as he had been. Draco had planned many fine speeches for when Harry got back to the dungeons.

One of them would definitely start with Did you think I'd be fooled for long? That one was because of the illusion of himself that Harry had created to follow Draco down to dinner and then back to the dungeons before it dissolved. The illusion couldn't do much more than smile and nod and make small talk like "Really?" and "You don't say!" but that had been enough to convince Draco, who was in a talkative mood, that it was Harry. Of course, then he turned around and Harry was dissipating into small motes of light. Draco had panicked for a minute until he realized that Harry had done it so that he could attend the meeting with Connor in private.

So that meant he thought of a second speech starting with I'm really angry with you, and containing many terms that sounded like insults but were, in fact, absolutely and utterly true. He would make Harry look at the floor in shame before he was done. One didn't fool a Malfoy like that.

The third speech consisted of I've been to see Professor Snape about your little stunt at dinner, you know. Then he could pause and watch the expression on Harry's face.

And there was his favorite so far, Harry? I was so worried about you. Let Harry's guilt bring him low, Draco thought, as he kicked viciously at the side of the bed. Then he would spend some time extracting

promises from Harry, including never, ever, ever to create illusions of himself again, while Harry was vulnerable and prone to giving them.

But that was before the explosion of magic sprang from atop the Owlery, and Draco fell back on the bed, overwhelmed by the scent of roses that had filled his nostrils and half-drugged him. When he had partially regained consciousness, he rolled over, sat up with one elbow leaning on the bed, and stared at the door.

There were many good points to being a Malfoy. At the moment, Draco couldn't decide whether his bloody sensitivity to magic was one of them or not. At least being overwhelmed by the scent of roses was better than being overwhelmed by a headache, he supposed.

The door of their room opened, and Harry came in. He carefully shut the door before he turned and met Draco's eyes.

Draco found himself utterly arrested by the expression on Harry's face. He had never seen him shine like that, his eyes the green of affection in Draco's bottle, his mouth moving in a free and open smile that had decision and wisdom and knowledge behind it, the lines of tension in his cheeks and forehead almost gone.

"Hi, Draco," said Harry quietly.

"What happened?" Draco whispered, the only words he could manage.

"Connor tried to compel me," said Harry. "And when I resisted it, that took care of the rest of the phoenix web." He hesitated, then stepped forward. "And it might, um, possibly have made me decide that I don't see the world the same way anymore, and that some things could be more important than my brother."

Draco couldn't breathe. For the first time since they'd been Sorted, he thought, he had the sensation that Harry was thinking solely about him, and not Connor.

Well, it's only fair, he tried to think. I've spent so much time and emotion worrying about him, it's only right that he start returning it. Go

on, Draco, tell him that you haven't forgiven him for his little stunt yet. Make him beg for your forgiveness.

It was what his mother would have done, or his father. But neither Narcissa nor Lucius was here right now.

"Forgive me?" Harry asked, with a small, nervous smile, as though he were actually worried that Draco wouldn't.

And someone—certainly not Draco, who had more poise than that—was saying in a half-broken voice, "There is nothing I wouldn't forgive you for right now," and leaning forward to hug Harry. And Harry was hugging him back, his mind, Draco knew, for once not rushing off to think of his brother.

It had been a long time coming.

Snape judged the moment less by the magic he felt sweeping through the school and more by the pain in his Dark Mark.

One moment he was sitting in utter agony before the fire, attempting to mark essays that wouldn't mark themselves, his teeth clenched as he fought the temptation to cast a numbing spell on his arm. He didn't want to. It would be like admitting weakness.

Then the pain was gone, like a beast wounded and sent running, and Snape sat in the absence of agony, blinking.

And then he felt the magic sweeping, and heard it singing.

He stood coolly and laid his quill down atop the essays. He made his way to the door of his private rooms. He was not shaking. He was not fumbling to open the door with hands that would barely obey him. He was not afraid that Harry might have called his magic in such extreme power because he had somehow got into another werewolf attack in the Forbidden Forest, or into other danger.

This is ridiculous, Snape thought savagely, and clamped down on the racing thoughts. He made himself take five deep breaths before he opened the door and stepped into the dungeon corridors. He turned

calmly in the direction of the Slytherin common room, and his strides had always covered great amounts of ground; he didn't need to worry that he was almost running now.

He was in time to see Harry and Granger come along the corridor towards the common room, and to hide around the corner to watch them. Granger was leading, bent towards Harry, obscuring his face. Snape fought to temptation to hex her bushy hair off, just so that he could see what expression his ward wore.

Then Granger waved to Harry and started back towards the stairs out of the dungeons, and Snape saw Harry's face.

He felt a breath go deep into his lungs and then pass out of them again, leaving him drained.

Harry was all right. He was more than all right.

His face wore a smile that had no touch of strain or stress. He was humming beneath his breath as he leaned near the stone wall and whispered the password that would let him into the common room. And, more to the point, the magic around him leaped and danced, creating faint images of golden and silver light that dissipated almost before Snape could see what they were. If Harry had been upset, his magic would have been snarling around him, and Snape, with the way that Lucius had taught him to sense power, would have a headache.

Snape stepped backwards and returned slowly to his rooms. He could have gone in after Harry and scolded him, certainly, but he found that he didn't particularly want to. He would wait for Harry to come to him and explain what had happened, and take action only if his ward tried to evade him or lie.

Snape didn't think that would happen. Not this time.

He sat down in front of the essays again, brightened the fire, and smiled with vicious glee. There, in the very first sentence of the next essay, was a glaring grammatical error.

Snape marked it with a flourish.

"Millicent! Millicent, did you feel that?" Pansy was practically babbling, and she'd fallen off the bed to the floor.

Millicent glanced calmly up from her Transfiguration book. "Of course I did, Pansy," she drawled. "I'm neither a stone nor a Mudblood." The air was surging with the scent of a thunderstorm brewing, and Millicent wasn't surprised. Harry was a hell of a powerful wizard, and it smelled as though he'd finally realized it.

Pansy picked herself up and scowled at her. "Sometimes I don't like you very much, Millicent," she said. "What was it?"

"Harry," said Millicent, with a shrug, and turned back to her book.

She could feel Pansy's eyes on the side of her face. She refused to turn around. Pansy wasn't that annoying, most of the time, but sometimes she could be. And Millicent had long ago sensed just what Harry could do, and had her guesses confirmed by her father, whom she trusted more than anyone in the world.

Adalrico trusted her back, and once Starborn had arranged the meeting between him and Harry last summer, he'd told his daughter what Millicent had already suspected: they had someone new to follow, a third option between absolute Dark and absolute Light.

Millicent was no stranger to power, either magical or political. She was her father's magical heir, and he had taught her all sorts of things from the time she was six years old and he realized it. Millicent had realized it earlier. She realized lots of things earlier. She was sometimes amazed at how long it took people to catch up.

Harry had finally caught up, it seemed.

Well, good, Millicent thought, as she turned another page in her Transfiguration book. Maybe that way, we can finally start getting some things done.

She wasn't Slytherin enough to conceal her smile.

Chapter Thirty-Two: Mastering Himself

“Legilimens.”

Harry stood as still as he could, and let down as many of his carefully trained defenses as he could. It was harder than he had thought it would be. As Snape had said would happen, his Occlumency shields were now part of the normal arrangement of his mind, and it took some work to move them, as it once would have taken work to shift the webs.

He had to know the truth, though, and he had to know it before he went to confront Dumbledore.

Snape looked long and carefully into Harry’s mind, and then stepped back. The expression on his face was so inward that Harry waited for a moment before he asked.

“It’s gone, isn’t it?”

Snape shook his head, then said, “Yes, it is. I cannot see a trace of the phoenix web anywhere in your thoughts.”

Harry closed his eyes in relief. “Thank you, sir.”

“But your mind,” Snape whispered. “Your mind, Harry. It’s been arranged in webs for so long that I did not think it knew any other way to grow. It may have taken its cue from the phoenix web, but it had made the shape its own. And now it is changing shape.” Harry opened his eyes to see his guardian looking at him as if he had done this on purpose, just to spite him.

“What is it?” Harry asked, half-wondering if he wanted to know. But he had promised himself. No more hiding—at least once he knew he was hiding—no more flinching from the hard choices. He had to know everything he could if he was going to work out the compromise he wanted to propose to Dumbledore, much less become the vates and stay allied with the purebloods and everything else he had to do.

"Your mind is becoming a forest," Snape whispered. "The webs are changing into canopies of leaves, the intersecting strands into vines, the sturdier places where you tucked your magic into trees."

Harry blinked, then laughed softly. "But that's a good thing, sir. I'd much rather have that as a symbol of life."

Snape eyed him. Then he seemed to realize that he was showing confusion in front of someone else, and that simply would not do. He straightened, and the expression vanished behind a wooden mask. "If you spend more than an hour in the Headmaster's office, Potter, I am coming in after you," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Harry happily, and stepped out of Snape's office. Draco was waiting for him. He seemed to consider it only fair that Harry was bringing him along this time, instead of Snape. Harry hadn't enlightened him to the real reason yet, but he did now as they turned in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

"I'd like you to watch, Draco, please," he said. "I know that I have to make a bargain, an alliance, with the Headmaster—"

"You could kill him," Draco suggested, his tone a bit too bloodthirsty for Harry's tastes. Harry rolled his eyes, and wondered which of his parents Draco had got this from.

"Maybe," he said. "But I don't want to."

"Why not?" Draco halted and frowned at him. Since Harry kept walking, that didn't work very well. Draco muttered under his breath and caught up with him a few strides later. "He hurt you. He betrayed you. He kept trying to get that damn web on you even when you didn't want it."

Harry shrugged. "And he's too powerful to kill, and he controls Connor a good deal more than I do right now. I still care about my brother, Draco. I just don't care about him only. I need to talk to Dumbledore. And that is the reason I need you there. If it seems at any point like I'm willing to sacrifice too much, give up things that you don't think I should, interfere."

"Oh, you can count on me for that," Draco said.

Harry gave him a small smile. "I know."

"Harry, come in," said Dumbledore as the door to his office opened. His voice was patient, calm, serene. Harry could tell it wasn't full of his usual grandfatherly good nature, though. He sounded as though he had no emotions at all, behind the serenity.

Harry nodded to the Headmaster and once again made for the left-hand chair, but Draco got in front of him and took it first. Harry gave him a curious glance only until he realized that the left-hand chair was slightly closer to Dumbledore's desk, and thus Dumbledore's wand. Rolling his eyes, Harry sat down in the right-hand chair instead. I know he cares about me, but there are times when he takes the protectiveness a bit too far.

"Headmaster," he said. "I came to talk to you about my magic and my brother."

"So you said in the note you sent me, Harry." Dumbledore inclined his head, his beard draping across most of the desk. "What I am unsure about is why you waited a week to talk to me."

"I thought I needed the time," said Harry. "I had to come up with a plan. I wanted to gain some control of my magic before I saw you again, in case I accidentally ate part of it." He watched Dumbledore wince with a malicious pleasure that was entirely new to him—well, all right, almost new. "And I wanted to do some reading."

"What is your plan, Harry?" Dumbledore might have been discussing the weather at the raising of Stonehenge. In fact, Harry thought, he probably would have showed more animation in a discussion of that. Some wizards argued that ancient weather patterns were the most important clues to ancient magic.

"To teach my brother," said Harry. "I ought to have done it before, but I didn't know how badly he needed it. Now I know. He's utterly incompetent in most of the things he ought to know, Headmaster. He

had to have a friend instruct him in pureblood rituals, and then he still misused them—“

“Purebloods are not the whole of the wizarding world, Harry.”

“But they’re part of it,” said Harry, “and I won’t see them left behind.” He nodded at Draco. “In some cases, they’ve been more welcoming to me, more understanding, than my own family.”

Dumbledore contrived to look unmoved as he said, “Still, Harry, that is mostly because of your power. And power isn’t everything.”

“No,” Harry agreed, because Draco was trying to say something unfortunate. “Learning is. And Connor has only learned how to use the compulsion ability, and then not in appropriate places. He tried to compel me in the Owlery, Headmaster.” He paused, then decided to ask. Even if it were true, it was in the past now. “Did you tell him to do that, sir?”

Dumbledore’s face had gone white. In the next moment, it went back to being free of all expression. “No, Harry, I did not,” he said. “I suspect that was Sirius’s idea. He has been spending almost all his time on the weekends with Connor and Lily, and he seems very dedicated to the idea of renewing your bonds of family.”

Harry nodded. “Then that is part of my bargain. I will teach my brother the things he ought to know and hasn’t learned—the pureblood rituals, history, how to control his power, how to duel, how to survive. In return, I want him taken away from Sirius.”

“You know that Connor will not like this,” said Dumbledore. “The boy adores your godfather.”

“I know that,” said Harry. “But he’s not learning anything useful from Sirius, Headmaster, only how to get his way and how to hate. And the Boy-Who-Lived will need to love the whole of the wizarding world, won’t he?”

Dumbledore actually jumped. Harry wondered why. But the Headmaster nodded briskly a moment later. “Yes, he will,” he

murmured. "If you feel that he is learning only hate, Harry, then I will remove him from Sirius's tutelage. Sirius had assured me that he was no longer teaching the boy to hate Slytherins or even Dark magic. He had said he was showing him the ethics of compulsion, when it may be used and when not. It sounds as though he lied to me." His voice had turned old, and infinitely sad.

Harry drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair for a moment. In some ways, this felt like betraying his brother. On the other hand, after what had happened in the Owlery, he was not much more inclined to show mercy to Connor than Snape and Draco had been to him at Malfoy Manor. If Connor had not torn the phoenix web and introduced him to the wonders of clear sight, which distracted him from his anger, Harry might have reacted to the compulsion violently enough to hurt him.

"Headmaster, do you know about the second prophecy?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "What second prophecy?"

Harry stared searchingly at him, blocking the attempt to Legilimize him instinctively. He couldn't tell if Dumbledore was sincere, because almost any emotion could be hidden behind that twinkling façade, but he seemed to be. Harry decided he would have to explain further, despite the tight hold Draco had on his arm.

"Professor Trelawney gave what sounded like a true prophecy early in February, Headmaster," he said. "I only heard the last three words, stand or fall. Ron and Connor heard the whole of it, but Connor won't tell me and Ron won't tell me, either, out of loyalty to his friend. I thought Connor had probably come and told you."

"No," said Dumbledore quietly. He sat in silence for some time. Harry waited. Draco shot him a small glare. Harry ignored him. He had done what he thought was necessary, and it hadn't been a sacrifice. He had thought that Dumbledore really did know all the things he asked about.

At last, the Headmaster looked up and nodded. "You may teach Connor, Harry, and I will inform him that his private lessons with

Sirius are to cease.” Dumbledore paused for a long moment, then added, “You surprise me with your willingness to enter into this. I thought that you would despise him after what happened, turn against him.”

Harry smiled. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile. “You trained me too well for that,” he said. “I love him, sir. I always will. But I refuse to simply be a mindless weapon for him, turned against his enemies on his whims. I want to teach him how to recognize his own strengths, and to know the things that any wizard can learn. He is the Boy-Who-Lived, but if Voldemort returned tomorrow and Connor needed to defeat him, we would all be doomed. So I think it best that he learn how to defend himself—which he was supposed to be doing by now, anyway, if my mother’s original plan had held true.”

“He has defeated Voldemort three times,” Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry sighed. “Twice, sir. My magic destroyed Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. I Obliviated Connor, because my magic would have done something more permanent to him otherwise, and let him think that he did it.”

Draco pinched his arm. Harry glared at him. “What?” he whispered. “I would think you would be smug that I told him that.”

“I am,” Draco whispered. “Now tell everyone else.”

Harry shook his head and turned away from Draco’s further pinches, back to Dumbledore. Dumbledore once again looked old, and he was looking out his window as though wanting a glimpse of a wizarding world that had vanished long ago. Harry felt a spasm of pity as he watched him.

At last Dumbledore turned back, and said, “If this is the bargain you wish to make, Harry—teaching Connor in exchange for Sirius teaching him no longer—then I am inclined to grant it. But there is still the matter of what to do about your power.” His eyes traced something invisible in the air, probably the outline of Harry’s aura. That was on Harry’s list to learn how to do, at least partially because he wanted to teach Connor how to do it.

"I know, sir," said Harry. "Professor Snape is helping me learn to see the edges of my compulsion and my ability to eat other wizards' magic, so that I'll know at once if I ever start exercising them."

"And what do you intend to do other than that?" Dumbledore was suddenly back to the stern old man Harry had seen him become on occasion, hardened in the matters of war, and his eyes pierced as they bore into Harry's.

"I intend to attend Hogwarts," said Harry calmly, "and teach my brother, and have more friends than my mother's plans would allow me to have. I have magic, Headmaster, and I even know more things than the average student might be expected to know. But I don't have other skills that the simplest child of four or five has. I want to build them. I want to learn how to live without my brother's shadow. And there are some things only time will teach me." He smiled slightly at the Headmaster's stunned expression. "Did you think I would run right out and become a war-leader, sir?" he asked.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Dumbledore murmured.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to," he said. "I know there are some things I won't have a choice about because of the sheer strength of my magic, or because of the people I want to protect and free." He thought again about the webs that Dobby and Fawkes had shown him, and grimaced. He would choose to walk the vates path when he was ready, yes, but in other ways, there hadn't been a choice from the moment he realized what a vates was and did. There was no way he could forget about or ignore it. "But there are other things I can choose. I'm not the Boy-Who-Lived. I'm not the general of the Light; that's you, sir. I'm not going to become a politician of some sort just because that would make people comfortable. And the phoenix web has made me hate giving orders. I can't see myself at the head of an army. I can't see myself at the head of any sort of force, really."

Draco pinched his arm. Harry glanced at him, and saw Draco's eyes widened in something that looked like a mixture of surprise and amusement.

"Do you think most of us are going to follow anyone else?" Draco whispered to him.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Purebloods ought to get over this dependence on anyone of pure power," he whispered back. "It's what keeps them following Lords. Do they want to be swayed only by magic all their lives?"

"It's more than that, Harry—" Draco began.

"I am glad, Harry," Dumbledore interrupted then, "to know that ambition is not one of the reasons the Hat chose you for Slytherin."

Harry shrugged. "I do want to accomplish things, Headmaster. Just not in the name of myself, or only for myself. I know that Connor has to lead us, because the prophecy chose him. But he'd be a horrible leader right now." That caused only the smallest twinge of guilt in his chest, where before he would have been literally unable to say it. Harry had to smile about that. "I'm willing to help him become what he has to be. That's one of my major ambitions."

"And another?" Dumbledore was smiling too, encouraging, as though he thought he could trust Harry now.

"To become a vates."

Dumbledore's smile vanished, and he sat up. "I hope that you think on that long and hard, Harry," he intoned. "After all, the wizarding world is built on webs. I do not imagine that most of the purebloods—" for a moment, his eyes flicked to Draco "—would thank you for taking their house elves away."

Harry smiled tightly. "I'm working on it, Headmaster. I know how hard it's going to be."

"That ambition has killed wizards in the past, Harry, or driven them mad," said Dumbledore quietly, his eyes never wavering. "Why do you want to do it?"

"Because I want to," said Harry, and stood. "Is there anything else that you wanted to request of me, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore sighed. "No. I will speak to Connor. It may take me some time to persuade both him and Sirius that their lessons must cease." He leaned forward, and connected his gaze with Harry's strongly enough that Harry found it hard to look away. "I am glad that we are allies on this, Harry. I would not have wanted you as an enemy."

"He had every right to think of you like that," Draco hissed, hovering protectively at Harry's right shoulder.

"It would have been counterproductive to make you an enemy, Headmaster," said Harry. "You've hurt me, but I'm used to being a sacrifice. And other debts..." He thought of Peter, and Remus. "I can wait to collect them."

Dumbledore's face changed, but Harry didn't stay to watch how it changed. He turned towards the office door instead, and waited patiently for it to shut behind them so that Draco could shout. He'd obviously been wanting to do so for a while.

Sure enough, Draco started as they rode the moving staircase downwards.

"What was that about not wanting to give orders, Harry?" he asked, with false sweetness. "What was that about not wanting to lead?"

Harry shifted to face him. "I'm hardly going to ignore the alliances I've forged with the purebloods, Draco," he said. "That's not what I meant. But I'm not going to march out at the head of some army, either. That's absolutely ridiculous. Why should I? When former Death Eaters like Hawthorn Parkinson turn against Voldemort and ally themselves with me, it's not in the hope that they'll be able to sneak back to Voldemort when he rises again. They know that he wouldn't forgive that kind of betrayal. They are committed to my goals, and my goals are Connor's and Dumbledore's."

"No, they aren't," said Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, not Connor's, I'll grant you," he muttered, thinking of the way that his brother had run away from him. He had apparently proclaimed, in the presence of Gryffindors, that Harry had tried to kill him. That got a few of them looking askance at Harry, but since the Gryffindors who'd heard that proclamation included the Weasley twins, they had wasted no time in creating a mask of Connor's face that floated about and wailed the same words while bursting dramatically into tears every few minutes. After that, most people were unable to take the news seriously. Harry was disgusted anyway, that his brother would think such a thing. "But they will be once I get to teaching him. And Dumbledore is finally coming around, I think. He knows it would be silly to provoke me. And he would be beyond stupid to alienate the purebloods, which he isn't. I just don't think that he thought he had any way of reaching them until now. Now he does, through me."

He stopped. Draco was staring at him. Harry waited until they were beyond the gargoyle, and then asked, "What? Are you stunned by my brilliant plan, or by my pretty face, or what?"

Draco blushed fiercely, but cleared his throat and said, "Do you really trust them, Harry? I don't. I think they'll twist back on themselves the moment they realize that you trust them, and don't want to hurt them. There were some purebloods who fought on Dumbledore's side in the last War, you know. And look at them now. The Weasleys are still poor. Black's fucked in the head. Do you think most of us want to follow their example?"

Harry groaned. "The Weasleys have been poor for a long time," he said, as he started back towards the dungeons. "And you know what happened to Sirius. You were there to hear it."

Draco sounded more normal as he followed, catching Harry up again easily. Harry wished for his growth spurt right now. At least then he would be able to storm away from Draco impressively. "Dumbledore could have helped the Weasleys, if he really wanted to. And he sure hasn't done a good job of helping Black. If that's his 'protection' for those dearest to him, then I don't think any of us want it."

Harry sighed. "Did any of the purebloods really think that I was going to turn my back on my brother and plunge wildly into some—I don't even know what it would be they would want. Leading a rogue band of outlaws on a crusade of vigilante justice?"

"Of course not," said Draco, with a sniff. "Vigilante justice is so crude. No, Harry. What we want is someone who'll speak up for us, who will lead legal fights against the Ministry, who will defend our homes and families and traditions against any kind of threat, whether that's Mu—Muggleborns trying to destroy our culture—"

"No one is out to destroy your culture, Draco—"

"Or other purebloods attacking us in the throes of war," Draco finished stubbornly, and slapped a hand on the wall that hid the Slytherin common room, preventing the door from opening. Harry turned around to face him, glaring. Draco didn't seem at all intimidated. His own face wasn't worked into a glare, but a simple stern look, as inflexible as the silver masks that Harry knew members of the Malfoy family had once worn to funerals. "We have a different view of the world than you do, Harry. You know our customs, but you don't know all the political realities. Of course, growing up as isolated as you did, that's not surprising. And we're willing to teach you, and allow you some time to learn them.

"But, sooner or later, we're going to need you for more than just sheer physical defense against the Dark Lord. We want a leader. I know that my father wouldn't have started truce-dancing with you if he wanted no more than a defender. I know what the truce-dance ultimately leads up to, and that's not the sort of connection that two soldiers forge with each other. It goes much deeper." Draco leaned closer. "You know that too, Harry, or you would never have answered him. Why did you?"

"Because it began as something I could do for my brother," Harry said through his teeth. "If the Malfoys weren't fighting him, then he had less chance of dying. I wanted to turn his enemies into friends. I intended your family to be part of his army, originally. Connor really will have to lead armies. Voldemort won't leave him alone until he does."

Draco cocked his head. “This isn’t about your brother anymore, Harry. It never was, but you were too blind to see that. So see it now. I’ve been writing to my mother a lot, talking to her. You’ve read those letters. And you read those books on the Guile family and compulsion and Lords that she sent me. People aren’t following you just to follow your brother by proxy or to get protection from—“ Draco took a deep breath, and forced the name out. “Voldemort. They’re following you for you.”

Harry grunted. He supposed he would have to think about it. What he did know was that he was no more suited to be what the purebloods wanted him to be than he was suited to be vates, right now. He wouldn’t give orders. He would leave decisions up to other people. He would follow the bonds of pureblood ritual and tradition, both because they were useful and because he loved them for themselves, but that was very different from leading, or governing, or ruling.

Right now. Does that mean that I could become what they want me to be, the same way I could become vates?

There was a disturbing thought, and Harry decided that he didn’t want to think about it anymore. He nodded to Draco, muttered, “Thanks for telling me,” and vanished into the Slytherin common room.

He couldn’t think about this right now, he reasoned, as he dragged his books out from his trunk. He had Charms homework to finish. “Good,” said Snape’s voice, from somewhere beyond the barriers that Harry had set up. “Now. Open your eyes, and tell me what you see.” His guardian’s voice had gone deep, lulling, into a softness of tone Harry would have never believed him capable of if he hadn’t heard it.

Harry opened his eyes. He blinked. “A forest,” he said.

“What?” Snape’s voice cracked the softness, and the forest vanished. Harry shook his head and touched his temple. He was sitting on another Transfigured stretch of mattress in Snape’s office, and the intense concentration needed to look for the edges of his magic was

draining him. “What did you say?” Snape insisted, stepping forward from behind the desk.

“I saw a forest,” said Harry, and glanced about. “The trees went just to the edge of your desk,” he added, pointing. “I saw vines on the walls. There were flowers—I think they were orchids—on the ceiling. It was centered around me. I didn’t have time to look behind me, but I think it might have been there, as well.”

Snape was silent for long moments. Harry studied his face, but could tell no more from it than he had been able to tell from Dumbledore at the start of their meeting. He resigned himself to wait. Perhaps Snape was just considering what it meant, and didn’t really have bad news to hand him.

As it turned out, it was the latter. “Harry,” said Snape, “you remember that I told you last week about your mind reshaping itself as a forest, after the webs?”

Harry nodded.

“That is—not supposed to happen,” said Snape carefully. “In your case, I think the magic that roars through you is taking on the challenge so as to have something to do. Also, it roots itself more firmly in you that way, and carves new channels it can travel. That makes it less likely to burst out of control.”

“That sounds like a good thing,” Harry ventured, hoping to make Snape smile, but his guardian only nodded absently.

“But,” Snape whispered, “your magic obviously does not have enough to do. Or its strength simply overflows your mind. So it is changing a small portion of the world around you into a reflection of your thoughts.”

Harry felt a chill travel down his spine. “I don’t know what that means,” he admitted. “Are oaks going to start sprouting through the floor?”

Snape waved a hand. “Nothing like that,” he said, with the irritated tone Harry was more used to hearing from him. “It is not the physical world that it changes. It is the mental and perceptual one. People around you may begin to see the trees, the vines, the—orchids.” Snape curled his lip as though he disdained the word. “It may be as mild as that. On the other hand, they may begin thinking like you, too. The magic extends your way of thinking outward, if you will. Your mind takes over from the space that other people’s thoughts are more used to occupying. They may begin hearing what you think, or—” Snape halted.

“I might start compelling them,” Harry finished with a sigh.

Snape shrugged. “Yes. Yet a different kind of compulsion from any you have done so far. There, other wizards, dazed by the strength of your magic, simply gave in to your desires. This makes them think that your desires are their own. In a deeper form, it might ultimately grow over their minds so as to make them part of your forest.”

Harry swallowed. He wanted to panic, and that meant he was not going to. “Is there any way that I can stop that?”

“Yes,” said Snape. “You may work more consciously with your magic. Assuming this is a result of its not having enough to do, concentrating it in other projects, using it more freely, might stop it from expanding your mind.”

“But that might mean more of the other kind of compulsion,” Harry finished.

Snape inclined his head. His eyes had never moved from Harry’s face, and they had gone inscrutable again. “Yes.”

“What are the other options?” Harry wished his magic was in front of him in some recognizable form, so he could glare at it. Stupid magic. Why does it have to be this strong?

“There are certain potions that will damp some of your strength for a time, so that you may grow used to controlling a certain level of it,”

Snape said. "I am reluctant to use them, however. I think it would be better to work on conscious control."

"Any other choices?" Harry asked.

"More Occlumency," Snape pronounced. "Tend your mind. Find another shape for it to assume. Do not permit it unchecked growth, and most especially do not let the rest of your magic combine with it and spread it."

Harry half-closed his eyes, trying to think of what he wanted his mind to look like. Perhaps he was thinking too hard about Snape's word "tend," or the fact that his thoughts apparently liked the shapes of trees and flowers, but he found only one that pleased him.

"A garden?" he asked, looking up at Snape. "Will that work?"

Snape's lip curled again. "If you think I am going to teach you to construct mental gazebos and beds of roses, Potter, you may think again."

Harry laughed, and used the laughter to ease past the moment of blinding, panicked fear, about what his magic might already have done to other people.

Yes, it might have. But this is one of those times when I recognize my mistakes and my shortcomings, and go on.

"No gazebos or beds of roses, sir, I promise," he said. "I was thinking more a hedge maze."

Snape's eyes lit in interest, and he stepped back. "Ready, Harry? Legilimens."

Harry allowed the intrusion, and settled himself to the task of making his incorrigible magic obey him.

Chapter Thirty-Three: On the Wings of the Storm

A howl of outrage from Pansy distracted Harry from eating breakfast and mulling over how best to word his return letter to Lucius. He sat back with a frown and leaned down the table, trying to see what had happened to her. The only time he'd heard her howl like that before was when Millicent had put marmalade in her hair one morning.

But Pansy wasn't swiping at her hair, or attempting to strangle and hex Millicent at the same time. Instead, she held the Daily Prophet in front of her and shook it as though she were going to tear it apart. Her eyes were fastened to the front page, but Harry hadn't received the newspaper and couldn't tell from here what story had upset her so much.

He glanced at Draco. The other boy frowned and shook his head. Harry started to stand up, but Millicent tapped him on the shoulder just then and handed her copy of the paper over.

Harry focused on the headline, and felt his breakfast congeal in his stomach.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC TO ENACT ANTI-WEREWOLF LEGISLATION

Harry couldn't help stealing a glance at the head table. Remus was pale, but he met Harry's gaze resolutely enough. Most of the school still didn't know he was a werewolf. He obviously wanted to keep it that way by not showing any overt reaction to the story. He turned the page as Harry watched and calmly took a bite of his toast.

Harry went back to the story.

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Minister Fudge has reported today that the Ministry of Magic will pass laws to control and regulate any werewolves living in Britain.

"It's quite ridiculous, the amount of leeway that we've permitted them," huffed the Minister as he met with the press on Friday to

discuss the proposed legislation. “There are much tougher laws on the books, but we’ve never enforced them, out of the goodness of our hearts. And now, to learn that a werewolf would come into the Ministry and attack one of our valuable employees. It’s an outrage!”

The Minister is referring to Monday’s attack on Walden Macnair, an executioner for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The werewolf Fenrir Greyback found his way into the Ministry offices of the Committee and tried to bite Macnair, claiming he wanted to punish the executioner for the amount of werewolves he had executed.

The attack was fended off and hushed up. Apparently, Mr. Macnair had a noble wish: to avoid bringing blame on all werewolves for the actions of one.

“Fenrir Greyback is a blemish on all his kind,” he told this reporter when she caught up with him on Friday after the Minister’s press conference. “He’s one of the few who can pass on his bite in human form, you know, because he’s so thoroughly embraced the wolf. I’m afraid of him. But that doesn’t mean that we should toughen all the laws. Other werewolves might live in harmony with us, if we just give them the chance.”

Minister Fudge evidently does not agree.

“What happened to Mr. Macnair is a horror and a crime that should never be allowed to take place again,” the Minister proclaimed to all assembled. “Therefore, we are placing laws in—in place to insure that it does not.”

The Minister refused to discuss the precise content of these laws, but hinted darkly that they would be much sterner than they have been in the past.

“We can’t have animals attacking good, decent magical folk,” was the Minister’s last word as he left the press conference. “It’s just not right.”

Harry laid his paper down and fought to calm himself. He could handle this. He really could. He had to think, and not react.

The first thing that came to mind was the letter Scrimgeour had sent him, in response to Harry's request for Remus to take over guardianship of Connor. That would be most unwise, Harry thought bitterly. Of course it would. The attack on Macnair hadn't even happened then, but the Ministry must have been considering toughening the laws. I bet you anything one of them is a law stating that no werewolf is allowed to have custody of a child.

The second thing was Starborn's reminder that Macnair and Greyback were working together, two servants utterly committed to the Dark Lord's cause. Harry had no doubt that the attack on Macnair was fake, a way to shove the faltering Ministry into passing the laws in the first place.

But why? Those laws will make things harder for Greyback, too.

The answer came easily. Because they want the werewolves to have no choice but to turn to Voldemort for help and protection—and become part of his armies, of course.

Harry wanted to scream in frustration. He supposed he could send a warning to Scrimgeour, but he doubted the man would turn against the Ministry he so loved, and Harry wouldn't be able to explain where he got his information about Macnair being a committed Death Eater. Mysterious letters, with a handwriting charm on them, from an even more mysterious source? Why, yes, of course, that sounds entirely trustworthy, Mr. Potter. I'll get on that right away.

Harry shook his head and went back to his breakfast. Damn it, he would have to think about this, but he just didn't know what to do right now.

Actually, he thought, as he heard the muted sobs down the table, he did know one thing he could do. He shoved back his chair and went to comfort Pansy. She was having to pretend to her peers who didn't know about Hawthorn that she was upset with something else in the paper. Harry wanted to reassure her that she wasn't alone.

By late Saturday afternoon, Harry had decided what else he would do. He'd drafted a letter to Scrimgeour explaining the situation, Starborn's letters and all. Harry had admitted that he didn't know who Starborn was, and Scrimgeour was free to leave or take the information as he saw fit. But Harry would have been bothered to do nothing at all.

He didn't quite manage to slip out of the Slytherin common room before Draco caught him. "Going alone to the Owlcave, Harry?" he asked, lightly, but with a familiar tightness around his eyes.

Harry scowled at him. "Well, I was." He hadn't been the most pleasant person to be around since the announcement of the Ministry's betrayal, he knew, but Draco took it in stride.

"Now you're not," he said, and jogged alongside Harry as he strode rapidly through the halls. Harry muttered to himself, and if the words "Ministry" and "blind idiots" appeared far more often than they should in a random rant, Draco was kind enough not to say anything about it.

Harry hesitated when they came to one of the usual third-floor corridors to the Owlcave. It was full of second-year Hufflepuffs, and the Weasley twins were standing in the middle of them, with enormous smiles. Even as Harry watched, a bang and a flash of colored smoke went up from beside the twins, and the Hufflepuffs shrieked.

Harry shook his head. "Not that way," he murmured to Draco, and they backed off before anyone could notice them. Harry turned around to take another route.

A light scampering sound reached his ears, and he whirled, wand drawn in his left hand. His first thought was of an artificial Dark spider, like the one that had attacked him outside Trelawney's Tower in February. But he saw the slight twitch of whiskers, and the slender shape of a rat, in time to stop himself from firing a hex. He relaxed.

"Disgusting," said Draco, and Harry glanced over to see that he'd drawn his own wand.

"Wait, no, Draco!" Harry caught his wrist. "This rat is a...friend."

"Really," said Draco, in a tone full of drawling disbelief that he had to have learned from Lucius.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and then Peter transformed. Draco yelped, but tried to step in front of Harry instead of scrambling away. "Who are you?" he asked. "If you want to hurt him, you'll have to go through me."

"And you say I say melodramatic things when I'm referring to my brother," Harry muttered, exasperated, and dragged Draco out of the way. He nodded to Peter. "What brings you here?"

"I found a new hole in the wards," Peter murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "And I came to ask you if you could look into my mind. I know you said you were learning Occlumency. What about Legilimency?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, I am, but I'm a very poor beginner at it so far." He'd had several arguments with Snape on the subject. While Harry had a natural liking for Occlumency's defensive shields, he found it very hard to want to push his will into someone else's mind. Snape understood that, and was deeply unsympathetic, pointing out that Harry still needed to learn it.

"Please try," said Peter. "Lately, my thoughts don't feel like my own. I see flashes of gold that remind me of the phoenix web sometimes, but I don't see how, since I know I got mine under control or I could never have escaped from Azkaban in the first place. I woke up this morning with the urge to tell you to trust Dumbledore." He shook his head. "I know it seems impossible, but could you please look?"

Harry hesitated, then nodded one more time. "All right, but if I don't find anything, then you might want to go see Snape."

"Are you kidding?" Peter snorted. "The man terrifies me."

"He's not that bad," Harry began, but gave up when he saw the expression on Peter's face. "All right, all right, but I'm not promising anything." He shifted his wand so that it pointed at Peter—he still

didn't trust himself to do this wandlessly—fixed his eyes on the other man's, and murmured, "Legilimens."

A brief, dizzying swirl of motion consumed him. He felt as though he were traveling forward, on the end of an arrow made of pure will. Then he was past the first trembling barrier and into Peter's mind.

He caught a glimpse of gold, but it vanished. Harry frowned and pressed forward, trying to find out if there really was a web here.

He found Peter's mind odd—endless gray corridors, broken here and there by doors that Harry supposed led to memories and suppressed emotions. Dark, prowling shapes were probably his mental defenses, or his magic. It wasn't until one of the shapes drifted past him and Harry recognized it as a Dementor that Harry realized Peter had constructed his mind to resemble Azkaban.

Swallowing a surge of pity that would distract him from his goal, Harry slipped past the Dementors and opened a few doors, looking for the golden web. He found nothing. The brightest color in Peter's mind was olive green, which flashed whenever Harry came near it. He supposed that was the part of Peter's will that had to do with protecting him.

Then he realized he had hunted in the corridors and behind the doors and past the Dementors, but he had not looked in one very simple place. He stepped back and looked up.

There was the web, a faint, glimmering thing, but real, stretching over the gray stone blocks of the ceiling. Harry let out a harsh breath and started to reach towards it, gently. He would not break it as he had the web of Remus's Obliviate, but there was no doubt that Peter needed it gone.

Then something jerked him rudely out of Peter's mind, and he looked up to see Professor McGonagall rounding the corner at a dead run, followed by Professor Sprout. "The wards are going mad," McGonagall said, panting. "What in the name of Merlin--?"

Peter had already transformed and scuttled back to whatever hole in the wall he had emerged from. Harry grimaced and managed to keep from looking after him. I bet Dumbledore left that hole open in the wards as a trap for Peter, so that he would be tempted to come here and seek me out, and Dumbledore could catch him inside Hogwarts.

"I didn't hear any wards, Professors," he said, and glanced at Draco.
"Did you hear any wards, Draco?"

The other boy solemnly shook his head. Harry smiled at him, thanking him for going along with the pretense, although he knew from Draco's pointed stare that he would have some explaining to do later.

"Of course you wouldn't, they're keyed to the professors," said Sprout, and pushed her tumble-down hat back on her head. "What do you think, Minerva? Should we search the corridors?"

"Of course, Pomona," said McGonagall, but she was frowning at Harry. Harry put on his most innocent expression. He knew that he could probably get McGonagall to believe him about Peter if he took the time to explain, but he didn't have Peter's permission to do so, not even the implicit permission he'd granted Harry to tell Draco about him by appearing in front of them both.

McGonagall shook her head at last, and she and Sprout both turned, trotting down a side-corridor. Harry sighed and faced Draco.

"I suppose we're going up to the Owlery?" he asked.

"Sure," Draco agreed easily. "And along the way, you can explain why you have the most interesting friends."

"Of course," said Harry. "I think it all started when this stuck-up, snotty pureblood boy approached me on the Hogwarts Express in the first year..."

He ducked Draco's punch, grinning. It kept him from thinking about what it meant that Peter was apparently wearing yet another phoenix web.

Harry yawned and knuckled at his eyes, then sat back with a sigh. Hermione had been right. Every single book with so much as a reference to the phoenix web had been removed from the library.

He stood, immediately drawing Millicent's attention. She'd settled the incipient fight between Draco and Harry earlier in the evening—Harry wanted to go to the library; Draco wanted to stay in their rooms and work on his Charms homework—by volunteering to accompany him. Draco had been a bit uneasy, but since he trusted someone else to watch Harry in Divination for him, he couldn't really object. And most people knew not to mess with Millicent, unless they wanted either a pulled ear or a vicious hex.

"Ready to go back?" she asked.

"Yeah." Harry glanced at the clock he'd brought along with him, another part of Draco's compromise. Draco seemed to think Harry would feel better if he knew instantly what Draco and Snape were doing at all times when they weren't with him. That way, he would know where to find them if he needed their comfort or company.

Snape's hand was lodged under PLOTTING. Harry hadn't yet seen it move, except when Snape was making potions; if Snape stopped plotting even in his sleep, he did it long after Harry fell asleep himself. Draco's was under STUDYING, but even as Harry watched, it moved. Harry smiled. So they had finished at the same time, and he could go back and entertain Draco. It really was a shame that the clock didn't include a setting for 'bored,' which Draco usually was when Harry wasn't with him.

Then Harry's smile froze as Draco's hand settled under IN DANGER.

Harry gasped, heart pounding and head feeling oddly light and dizzy. He nodded to Millicent. "Can you bring my clock and my books for me?" he whispered, and then tore out of the library.

"Harry? Harry!" Millicent was shouting after him, earning a sharp reprimand from Madam Pince. Harry ignored them both. Millicent was

a smart girl. She would be able to look at the clock and see what was happening.

Harry reached the stairs and skidded down them, rolling and falling where necessary, the way that Lily had taught him to fall from a broom. His thoughts were chaotic, welling on the edge of panic, but he refused to let panic rule him. He made a plan instead, and brought his magic up around him, locking it firmly in place. He was ready if someone struck at him with a spell, and he was ready to destroy any Dark artifacts that might threaten Draco the way he had destroyed the snake.

He reached the dungeon corridor, and forced himself to pause as he heard a sharp crack from ahead. It sounded like the crack of a house elf's Apparition. When he stepped around the corner, though, there was no house elf there.

Harry hurried to the door, gasped, "Dragonsbane," and then all but jumped inside as the wall slid open. He tore through the common room, earning more than his share of curious looks, and then snatched open the door of their bedroom—

And stopped.

Draco looked up curiously from his Charms book. "Harry! You're back. What's the matter?" He sat up, looking concerned.

Harry stared around the room, breathing hard. He saw no evidence of Dark magical artifacts, nor of anyone hiding and waiting to cast a spell. He concentrated on his hearing, but couldn't hear the slight breathing and shuffling that would have given someone under an Invisibility Cloak away. Harry bit his lip, bewildered. Had the clock been wrong after all?

A warning twinge, his magic breathing in another kind of magic perhaps, wafted over his skin, and he remembered his experience in Peter's mind last weekend. He took a step back and looked up.

The ceiling was covered with a rustling mat of spiders, like the one that had attacked him in the corridor by the North Tower.

Harry had barely seen them when they fell on him.

Harry went to his knees, ignoring Draco's shout of his name, forcing himself to remember what the spider in the corridor had done. Breathed out spores, he thought, and took a deep breath and held it, even as his skin crawled from the effect of hundreds of tiny legs racing all over it.

Hard ridges, the spiders' metallic outsides, brushed and cut him. Harry felt mandibles snap at his sleeves and robe folds, but luckily the cloth was fending them off so far. But it was only a matter of time before one of them found skin. Harry wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that their bite was poisonous.

He couldn't use cold; it probably wouldn't affect Dark magical artifacts like this. He shuddered as a crawling leg rasped at his lips, and one of the spiders did a tap-dance across his eyelid. He couldn't use Parseltongue, as he had to call the snake, because these weren't serpents.

What would be the best weapon?

He hit on it just as a spider hit on him, and its mandibles went home into flesh. Harry wailed silently at the unexpectedly icy sting of the poison, but didn't let himself scream aloud. He was growing dizzy with lack of breath, and the solution to that problem was to destroy the spiders.

He imagined the small ball of golden light he'd called to rest in his hand, like a Snidget or a phoenix, when he'd given his message to everyone who cared to see it on the vernal equinox. He clenched his hands close together and imagined that intensity of power again, only this time he wouldn't let it expand. He would concentrate it in a tight space, just around his body, just above his skin, and—

A second spider bit him just before it burst into flame from within, irradiated by a blast of pure magic. Harry viciously held onto his breath and his power, not letting it surge outward. It crackled just above his skin, burning the spiders' metallic outsides, overwhelming

their magic with its own, and Harry imagined it hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter, until the last spider fell away from him.

He stood, wobbling uncertainly, breathing in what felt like the most wonderful air ever created, and caught Draco's horrified eyes in the moment before dizziness swamped him. "Poison," he whispered. "Tell Snape to look at the spiders' jaws, if any are left."

He pushed his magic back inside his skin, and then collapsed. Two icy arrows of venom rode his body towards his heart.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew he was in the hospital wing, because he remembered the spiders biting him, and where else would he be? He was not lucky enough to have Draco merely tell Snape and have his guardian brew an antivenin that would cure him at once and keep the matter quiet.

He saw Draco first, on one side of the bed, and Snape on the other. Draco gave a little cry of relief and clenched his hand down on Harry's left one. Harry didn't feel anything for a moment, and panicked, but then Draco lifted his hand high enough for him to see it was all there, fingers intact. Harry relaxed a bit and looked at Snape.

"The spiders' ice numbed your extremities," Snape said, his voice not giving anything away. "It will be some time before you regain all feeling in your left hand and your right foot, the places where they bit you. But you will live, and you will regain it eventually."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, sir. I'm alive thanks to a potion that you brewed, I take it?"

"There would not have been time to brew it from scratch," said Snape. His body was still tightly coiled, his voice nearly as cold as the venom. "But it was similar enough to adder poison that I was able to modify the formula, and that saved your life."

"Thank you, sir," Harry repeated.

Snape abruptly stood and strode from the hospital wing. Harry watched him go with a puzzled frown, then glanced at Draco, who just shook his head.

"Don't mind him, Harry," he whispered. "He was frantic when he thought you were going to die. And then it turned out you weren't, and now he seems to think he has to go cold to make up for feeling a real, human emotion. Besides, he needs someone to blame, and he hasn't figured out how to blame you for risking your life yet." Draco hesitated, his face growing sober. "Or who sent those spiders into the room."

Harry gnawed his lip. His thoughts felt sluggish, probably as a result of the potions he'd taken, but he could force them to move, leap, and concentrate. "You never saw them enter?"

"No," Draco admitted. "They were small enough that they could have hidden in all the corners of the room, then come together just in time to catch you."

Harry blinked. "I thought they were for you," he said. "The clock said you were in danger."

"I probably was," Draco said. "Snape recognized the spiders—the Dark Lord had some like them, from the treasuries of some of the older Dark families. They'll obey their master's orders, go into a room and wait for a command to attack, but they're not really smart. After a certain amount of time has passed, if they can't fulfill their orders to attack one particular person, then they'll bite anything that moves."

Harry sighed, as he remembered the crack of house elf Apparition. "I think someone had a house elf watching for me, to report when I was almost in the room," he muttered. "And I didn't even pause to think about it. I was too worried that you might already be dying."

Draco grinned at him. "You don't need to apologize for that, Harry. I'm flattered, really." Then he sat back, and his face assumed a more austere expression. "But you do need to explain dashing out of the library so quickly that Millicent couldn't follow."

Harry stared at him. "I just did. I thought you were in danger."

"And what if someone had attacked you on the way back to the dungeons?" Draco countered. "What if the person threatening me wasn't setting up an ambush in our room, but along the way, and just used the spiders to make you panic and not think about where you were going?"

"That's ridiculous, Draco," said Harry. "You're getting paranoid."

"I'm sensible," Draco retorted. "And you nearly died. And you have a vengeful best friend, and a vengeful guardian stewing in the dungeons who is going to make everyone's life hell for the next few days while he tries to figure out a way to admit he was terrified for you. I think that's worth some basic safety, Harry." He leaned back and looked at him sternly until Harry nodded in reluctant acceptance.

"Good!" said Draco brightly. "Now, Blaise has agreed to give up some sleep so that you can still shower at your insanely early time—"

That was as far as Draco got before the door to the hospital wing abruptly crashed open. Harry blinked and turned his head. Connor stood in the doorway, looking nearly as angry as he had when he first accused Harry of making their mother a Muggle.

"How dare you!" he screamed in Harry's general direction.

"I am going to kill him."

Draco didn't shout the words, which was what had Harry worried. He snapped his hand out and cried, "Expelliarmus!" as Draco tried to draw his wand. The wand smacked into Harry's palm, and Draco gave him a furious, betrayed look.

Connor was still ranting. "How could you take me away from my lessons with Sirius?" he shouted. He stood at the foot of Harry's bed and yelled hard enough that Harry could feel the flecks of spittle on his face. "The Headmaster just told me. I don't know what you did to Dumbledore, maybe you compelled him or something, that would make sense, that's what Dark wizards do, but how could you—how

could you—" Connor broke off, breathing raggedly. His face was red with splotches and tears.

Harry didn't know what Draco was going to do in time to prevent it, and given how sore his muscles felt, he might not have managed to move even if he did. Draco punched Connor in the face with all his strength. Harry heard the savage crumple of bone, and his brother fell to the floor, wailing.

"Your brother just nearly died," Draco said, and he had never sounded more like Lucius to Harry. He bent over Connor and said the words directly into his face, tone hard and cold enough to make Harry shiver. "And you, instead of coming here to ask after his health like a concerned sibling, come here and accuse him of trying to make life better for you. So he's taking you away from that insane idiot you call a godfather. He's teaching you himself, did you know that? Giving up time and effort so that you can become a better wizard."

Connor said something that Harry couldn't understand, given that his fingers were clamped over his face. At least part of it sounded like "want to corrupt me," though.

Draco's voice grew harsher and quieter. "It's beyond me why Harry cares for you," he spat. "But he does, Merlin help him, and so I'm not going to kill you—although I knew a few hexes that would be worth Harry's ill regard for the next two years. I'm going to insure that his life is still good, even with you in it, you worthless piece of hippogriff dung. You won't take anything away from him. I'll drag you into being a good brother if I have to. I'll make sure that he still smiles and laughs even while he's teaching you. And someday, I'll make you apologize, and mean it."

He stood and moved away from Connor, who lay on the floor, sobbing. Harry sat in the middle of the bed and had no idea what to say. Draco moved up beside him.

"I'm never going to apologize for that one, Harry," he said, eyes narrowed. "You might as well give up the idea right now. And I'm going to sit in on every one of your lessons with him, and make sure that you're not just pouring your skill and love down the drain."

"All right," Harry whispered. His head rebounded with the echoes of what Draco had said to Connor. Two realizations had come up on him sharply.

There really are other people in the world who don't think my brother is worth more than hippogriff dung. If I think that, I'm not going to be alone. I don't have to feel guilty. That was the first one.

The second was, Merlin, how much must Draco care for me, to want to spend time with a person he abhors, just to make sure I don't kill myself trying to do the impossible?

"Can I have my wand back now?" Draco asked, and Harry absently handed it over.

"What is all this?" Madam Pomfrey asked just then, sweeping around the corner with a tray on a strap around her neck. The tray contained various shimmering vials of potion, Harry saw. "I step out for five minutes, and a fight happens, in my hospital wing?" She shook her head and set the tray down on the table next to Harry's bed. "Into a bed, Mr. Potter—Connor. Mr. Malfoy, please leave now."

She doesn't sound as outraged as she should have, Harry thought, staring at the matron. And isn't it a coincidence that she only entered after everything was all over?

Madam Pomfrey caught his glance and tilted him a wink as she helped Connor into a bed. Harry blinked several times. So it's not only students who don't really like Connor.

Merlin help me, I'll have a lot of work ahead of me to teach him the proper way of things.

"See you tomorrow, Harry," Draco said softly, drawing his gaze back, and then squeezed his hand and left the hospital wing.

Harry lay back, absently accepting a sleeping potion when Madam Pomfrey insisted he take it. Until it took effect, his thoughts whirled and danced in the chaos he hadn't permitted them to assume earlier.

I have a lot of things to think about.

Harry winced as Sirius bowled out of the Great Hall, obviously on the verge of yet another fight with Snape. At least Sirius had himself under better control now, and would walk away when the insults grew too fierce, instead of attacking.

A glance back at the head table told Harry that Snape was smirking as he finished his breakfast, viciously pleased with himself. Harry groaned softly. He wished that Snape had found something more productive to do with his anger at the murder attempt on Harry than simply insulting the other professors until they cracked. Of course, if they could actually find out who had done it, then he might calm down—or at least refocus his anger on the criminal instead.

Harry sighed wearily and scooped up a spoonful of porridge. Dumbledore had questioned all the house elves in Hogwarts. None of them had put the spiders into the Slytherin rooms, or spied on Harry's progress and told the spiders' master when to release them. Harry didn't trust the Headmaster—least of all since he had learned about the renewal of Peter's web—but he didn't really think Dumbledore would have lied about this. Indeed, he had been very concerned over almost losing Harry. He still needed him to teach Connor, of course.

"Harry."

Harry jumped at the grave tone in Draco's voice, and turned to see his friend holding the Daily Prophet out towards him. Harry swallowed and took the paper. He wasn't sure what he expected to see on the front page—more about the anti-werewolf legislation, which was encountering some problems, maybe, or mysterious news of Fenrir Greyback's even more mysterious activities.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw what was there.

DEATH EATERS ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN

"Shit," Harry whispered, and skimmed the story. Various phrases leaped out at him here and there.

...lack of Dementors on the prison, as they were called to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to look for the fugitive Peter Pettigrew...guards described a 'gray presence' invading their minds and sending them to sleep...anti-Apparition wards destroyed...the prison has lost all the Death Eaters in custody, including the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange...Aurors can find no trace...

Harry put the paper down and took a deep, steadyng breath. He knew what he was going to do about this, unlike the werewolf legislation.

Thus, when Draco asked him just that a moment later, Harry was able to smile grimly and say, "I'm going to fight, of course. And train Connor to fight. He's one of their primary targets."

"Aren't you glad that I insisted on coming to the lessons and tightening the protections around you after all?" Draco asked lightly, his hand shaking just a bit as he picked up an apple. "This way, we're already half-prepared."

Harry nodded. His panic was subsiding into grim determination.

I will not let them destroy me with fear. Fear is eating the Ministry alive from the inside out. Fear is destroying Connor. It hinders Dumbledore and makes Snape impossible to live with.

I am going to fight.

Interlude: A Last Warning

April 10th, 1994

Dear Mr. Potter:

It has been some time since I have written to you, I know. I have been busy collecting information, at great personal risk to myself. The journey was not so bad. The destination most assuredly was, and if anyone had guessed what I was doing, the consequences would have been incredibly harsh.

I have prompted you to ask why Sirius Black did not go to Azkaban. However, you have not been diligent in seeking the answers. That will not do, Mr. Potter. You must begin to take your duties seriously—and that includes your duties as a leader of importance to both Light and Dark wizards as well as your duties in protecting your brother.

As you assuredly did not know, Sirius Black was your parents' original Secret-Keeper. But then his brother Regulus was captured when attempting to leave the Death Eaters, in possession of an object that Voldemort valued very much. Alas, I have been unable to learn what this object was.

Voldemort used a curse to connect Sirius's and Regulus's minds, and let Sirius feel his brother's pain as he tortured him to death. In so doing, he intended to break Black and make him give away your parents' location. But Dumbledore intervened before he could. Peter Pettigrew became your parents' Secret-Keeper in Black's place, with instructions to betray you at an appropriate moment. If that does not convince you of Dumbledore's malice and Pettigrew's innocence, then nothing ever will. Make a less wary connection with Pettigrew, I urge you. I believe he has come to seek you from pure motives.

This information I learned from Pensieves. There is one more piece of information, which I learned from a tapestry, and which may be of interest to you:

Sirius was disinherited by his parents when he was sixteen, after he ran away to your father's house. That resulted in his mother blasting

him off the Black family tapestry and making his brother Regulus heir. However, the tapestry I have seen has Sirius's name printed clearly on it.

I believe this is the reason that Regulus's existence was concealed from you, your brother, and so many other people, as well as the circumstances of his death. There are spells that will work against inheritance magic if the designated heir is both dead and forgotten by enough people, and if the person selected as heir instead is related to the family by blood or adoption. It is the only reason I can give for why Sirius Black's name is still on the tapestry as the heir of his line, rather than the inheritance having passed to his cousin, Bellatrix Black Lestrange.

For some reason, Sirius wanted to remain his parents' heir, and Dumbledore agreed.

Think on that, Mr. Potter, and be careful whom you trust. This is one of the last times that I will be able to help you pass one of the harsh tests of life. Soon, you must take your place as leader, and then there will be no one to shield you. You must make your decisions, and those decisions will include killing.

Yours in starlight and shadows,

Starborn.
April 10th, 1994

Lucius:

You will note already that you do not recognize my handwriting. That does not matter. Be assured that I hold the same position as the last person who wrote to you. However, he has proven...most unsatisfactory as a servant. He has been replaced.

You do not know me by my writing, Lucius. This quill was guided by unfamiliar hands. However, I know you. I can imagine your eyes widening with shock, then narrowing as you try to process what this

will mean for you and your family. Have no fear, my sly and cunning Lord of Bad Faith. I will tell you what it means.

It means destruction. You and your family were doomed from the moment you chose to ally yourselves with Harry Potter. I have been patient long enough. There is no forgiveness now. And my true allies, now escaped from the isle of mists and unhappy memories that obscured them for so long, will not forgive you, either.

You will have heard about the attack of spiders on your best hope for the future? That was only a demonstration of my power, Lucius. Be assured, if I wanted him dead, he would be. However, I do not yet want Harry Potter dead. I have far more specific uses for him in mind. There will be justice before I am finished.

The Dark Lord has almost returned, Lucius.

Now comes the night, and out of this darkness, there will be no morn.

Chapter Thirty-Four: Educating His Brother

"I don't think he's coming."

Harry glanced up, blinking, from Scrimgeour's letter, which he was reading for the fifth time, in an attempt to deduce any useful clues from the bland government-speak that the Auror had chosen to send him in return for his warning about Greyback and Macnair. "Why not?" he asked, when he finally realized Draco was talking about Connor.

"I don't think he's coming," Draco repeated. He gave a sneer around the abandoned classroom they sat in, as though the newly cleared dust was about to return.

"Yes, but that doesn't tell me why," Harry said, folding the letter and tucking it in a pocket. "He said he would be here." He held up the piece of parchment he'd enchanted to communicate back and forth with a piece of parchment Connor held. It was a variation of the spells that made the Marauder's Map, but simpler; it insured that any message written on either piece of parchment would appear on both. Connor's I'll be there. Now stop bothering me was still visible at the top of the page. Harry knew from the scratches on the b's, almost tearing through the parchment, that his brother was angry and sullen.

"Because he's afraid of you," said Draco, leaning back on a desk and kicking at the legs of another. "Because he's afraid of me. Because he's a wanker."

Harry tried to hide a chuckle, though he suspected from the sidelong glance Draco gave him than he'd probably heard anyway. "You're bored, aren't you?"

"Well, that and he was supposed to be here five minutes ago," Draco said.

"You said that you would help," Harry reminded him. "Of course, you can leave, and I wouldn't blame you. This isn't likely to be easy, or pleasant."

Draco shook his head, his face closing. “I said that I would help you get something worthwhile out of him, and I will,” he said. “Besides, if I left, you would have to come with me. There’s no way that I’ll let you be alone with him ever again.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Draco often made grand pronouncements like that and forgot them five minutes later. This one would linger, undoubtedly—it had only been three days since Draco punched Connor in the nose—and it was true that Draco was giving up his Easter holidays with his family to stay at the school and help Harry with Connor. But he would have to forget it soon. “Whatever you say.”

He glanced up sharply as the door opened. Connor shuffled in, his face red. Harry couldn’t tell if it was mostly from sullenness, embarrassment, anger, or something else. He shut the classroom’s door behind him and leaned against it, glaring at Harry, his arms folded.

Harry felt a brief and entirely unexpected twinge of sympathy for teachers like McGonagall, who had to coax students determined to resist her teaching methods into appreciating the subject. He knew he couldn’t get away with her sternness, though, nor with Snape’s intimidation. He thought it better to imitate Remus, so he plastered a smile on his face and said, “Welcome, Connor. I’m glad that you decided to come.”

“The Headmaster told me that I didn’t have a choice,” said Connor. He’d made an obvious effort to strip all the emotion from his tone, but some was still there—bubbling fury. Harry concealed a sigh, making sure he did better at it than he had hiding his laughter from Draco. “And he told me that I can’t have lessons with Sirius any more, either. Why did you do that?” He squinted at Harry, ignoring Draco with all the persistence of a child.

“Because I’m worried about you,” said Harry. Remus is always honest. He always explains the motivations behind his lessons. “You were spending so much time with Sirius that you were picking up on his attitudes. You’d started to hate Slytherins and think we were all evil.”

"Well, you are," said Connor, sidling a few steps away from the door, but not coming any nearer Harry.

Harry sighed. Maybe this is the place to begin, then. He'd intended to start with practical lessons first, to get Connor used to some other kind of magic besides compulsion, but he couldn't do that if Connor absolutely refused to learn. "Do you really think that everyone in Slytherin is evil, Connor?" he asked softly. "The little eleven-year-olds who were Sorted into our House this year? Or the people who work in the Ministry and on the Daily Prophet and in Hogsmeade and in Diagon Alley and everywhere else who were Slytherins?"

"None of them work in those places," Connor insisted.

"It looks like you'll have to give him practical lessons in basic intelligence, Harry," Draco drawled.

"Shut up, you're not helping," Harry muttered at him, and then dived in before Connor's startlement could give way to outrage. "They do, Connor. Did you know that Madam Malkin, the one who made our robes for Hogwarts, used to be a Slytherin?" It had been easy enough to learn that; Hogwarts, A History had a list of past Slytherin students and what they were doing now. "And Zonko, who runs the joke shop? And Rufus Scrimgeour, who's the Head of the Auror Office? He chases Dark wizards all day, and he made a vow when he was twelve that he was going to use Light magic only, and he's kept it ever since. Do those sound like evil people to you?"

"They don't sound like it," Connor admitted reluctantly. "But they could be hiding it. Sirius told me. That's the trouble with Slytherins. You think you know them, and then they turn out to be something else." He glared at Harry. "Like you. We thought you were going to be a Gryffindor all the time we were growing up, and then it turned out that you weren't."

Harry sighed. "I don't think anybody planned where I went, Connor."

"I knew," said Draco lowly.

Harry shook his head at him. "I wanted the Hat to put me in Gryffindor," he went on, turning back to his brother. "That was so I could protect you. I wanted to share the same House as you did, the same friends, the same life. I wanted to do everything for you."

"What changed?" Connor whispered, and Harry was astonished to see tears edge into his eyes. It honestly hadn't occurred to him that his brother, under all the rage and the hate and the fear, might miss him.

"Then? I wasn't sure." Harry shrugged. "Now, I think it had to do with how well I'd been trained to hide everything—"

"Ah-ha!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "That was Mum who trained me to hide things, not anyone else," he said sharply. "No one was ever supposed to know that I could protect you, that I was the reason you were surviving the attacks that you were. I was supposed to guide and protect you into becoming a defeater of Voldemort without ever revealing that I'd done it. I was supposed to die in the final battle defending you, if possible, and no one would ever know that it came from my dedication to your service. It would just be the love of a brother for another brother."

He felt a brief tremor of unease race down his spine as he contemplated that. He had seen his life as a straight line for a long time, running until that final battle, when he would undoubtedly die. If he survived, the images were less clear, but they would still include serving Connor.

And now those were gone, and Harry had, so far, no perfected image of the future to replace any of them.

It's no wonder that so many wizards gave up on being the vates, he thought. I would give much for a path where I knew where I was going.

He shook himself out of it when he realized that Draco's arms were around his waist, and Draco was glaring bloody murder at Connor over his shoulder. Harry turned to face him. "What?" he whispered.

"He's just standing there," Draco snarled back. "Like he doesn't know what to do. Like he doesn't think that his precious Gryffindor Mu—"

"Draco."

"Muggleborn, Muggleborn, I was going to say Muggleborn," said Draco. "Like he doesn't think she could have made someone into a Slytherin. I know that you told him about being forced to act as his slave once before. Why doesn't he believe it?"

"Too much time with Sirius." Harry tried to slip out of Draco's embrace, and couldn't do it. Draco even shook him slightly when he tried.

"No," he said. "I want him to see that someone values you, damn it."

"Or you want to taunt him about having my company and friendship when he doesn't," Harry muttered back.

"That, too."

Harry faced Connor once again. Connor had closed his mouth and swallowed painfully. Then he looked up and said, "But you can't deny that the largest number of Death Eaters were Slytherins, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "No, I can't. But only because Voldemort was in that House and had the most contacts among them—"

"Ah-ha!"

"That's really very annoying, you know," Harry told him. "And Slytherin House existed for almost a thousand years before Voldemort came to Hogwarts, and it went on existing after him. My point is that not everyone who comes out of the House is evil, Connor. I'm not going to force you to judge me as good, or Draco, or Millicent, or anyone else in Hogwarts right now. But if you really think that the Sorting Hat separates out people who are evil or good, then why do

you think there are three good Houses and one evil? Why do you think Slytherins are allowed to stay in Hogwarts at all? Wouldn't it make more sense to just exile them the moment the Sorting Hat chose them as Slytherin, and refuse to teach them magic?"

Connor waved a hand. "It doesn't work like that. Sirius explained it to me. They have to keep Slytherins around to keep an eye on you. It would be worse to let you run around loose and become even Darker wizards." He scowled at Harry. "And Gryffindors are the best of the best, the Light wizards."

"And Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," said Connor, with an impatient shrug. "Sirius didn't spend a lot of time talking about them. They're just...there, I suppose. The wizards in them can be good, but that doesn't mean they're really important. They follow Gryffindors when it comes to fighting Slytherins, and that's enough."

"I resent that highly," said a voice from the door.

Harry whirled as much as he could in Draco's hold, which wasn't much. Zacharias Smith leaned against the classroom door. He had a smile on his face, but it didn't reach his eyes. They were fixed on Connor, and they made Harry wince. He had seen Zacharias look like that in class when he thought someone else was being stupid, and it usually meant a series of pointed questions was about to occur.

"And so do I," said Hermione, as she pushed in behind Zacharias. "You're making our House look incredibly asinine and prejudiced, Connor."

Hermione had been feeling like that for some time, really.

She was the one who had all but forced Connor into going to his lesson with Harry, by threatening him with not helping him study for Charms if he didn't. Since Connor was having a lot of trouble with levitation Charms stronger than Wingardium Leviosa, he had slouched off, with a scowl.

Hermione hadn't been able to restrain herself. She'd waited until ten minutes after Connor left, then announced to Ron that she was going to the library. Since Ron was engaged in a game of chess with Ginny, he'd just let out a "Hmm," and Hermione had ducked out without further problems.

I have to see what they're studying, she'd assured herself as she hurried down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower. It might benefit me, after all. If they're studying pureblood rituals, then I can get to see them in action, and complicated spells would help, too. It's not really just nosy curiosity. Of course not.

She did cast the Disillusionment Charm on herself before she reached the classroom door, and was glad she had. Zacharias Smith was lurking there, listening in a way that Hermione was convinced was...evil. Or at least, annoying. Zacharias Smith was an annoying git who only got as many points as he did for Hufflepuff because he was pureblooded, Hermione was convinced, and had mastered pureblood poise. That meant she had to work twice as hard as he did, since she was Muggleborn. And Smith never let her forget it, either; whenever a class, even History of Magic, referred to purebloods somehow, he would catch Hermione's eye and give her a cool smile. She wondered if he knew that only made her more determined to defeat him.

Bloody annoying git, Hermione's thoughts continued, and were so pervasive that for a moment she didn't listen to what was actually happening in the classroom.

Then she did, and was appalled.

Connor's an idiot, she thought fretfully. All right, so I don't like most Slytherins either...well, Harry's all right. And even Malfoy's all right when he's worried about Harry. And I suppose Parkinson hasn't been as bad since that newspaper article about werewolves, though I still don't know why it affected her so much. And Millicent terrorizes people who want to hex Harry, not me.

But still! she added in her head, feeling she was being disloyal to Gryffindor. I don't think that he has any right to spout that slime about

Slytherins. How is it any different from being prejudiced against Muggleborns, really? Some Slytherins are perfectly awful people, but some aren't. And I can think of Hufflepuffs who are worse, she thought, with a glance at Smith.

Then Connor dismissed the whole of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Houses as if they weren't important, and that made Smith step in. Hermione had known it would. He couldn't stand being insulted, even if it was by proxy and not personally.

"I resent that highly," he said, sliding into the room.

Hermione hesitated for a moment. Do I have to go in? No one knows I'm here. And I'm sure that Smith will only try to outshine me, again.

No. I know I'm here. And if I don't say anything, then I'm agreeing with Connor, and I don't want to do that. Besides, a preening pureblood shouldn't be the only voice of good sense here.

She lowered the Charm, stepped in behind Smith, and said, "And so do I." For a moment, she wondered if she'd said the words soon enough after Smith's for them to really play off his, but decided she had, from the fact that no one looked at her in confusion, only surprise. "You're making our House look incredibly asinine and prejudiced, Connor."

Connor gaped at her. Harry just lowered his head as though resigned, and Malfoy tightened his arms around his waist, shooting Connor a smug smile that Hermione doubted he noticed.

So, of course, Smith had to fill the void.

"Careful, Granger," he murmured. Hermione glanced at him and saw his eyes narrowed in that squinty pureblood way she hated, but they were narrowed at Connor and not her. "Are you sure you should be using the word 'asinine?' We don't want to strain the little boy's brain-power, after all."

Hermione found an unexpected smile creeping onto her face. "You're right, of course, Smith," she said. "Since Connor's apparently never

read any book, at all, that talked about a good Slytherin, I think he can't have read too many books." She nodded at Connor with mock apology in her expression. "Sorry, Connor. Little words from now on, all right?"

Connor went red and began to splutter. Smith cocked his head on one side, watching him. "What do you think, Granger?" he asked her. "Will dramatic speeches from our future leader of the Light consist of splutter, splutter, spittle, spittle?"

Hermione pretended to debate with herself, pursing her lips in a way she'd got from McGonagall. "Add another spittle, I think," she said finally. "There's certainly enough flying from his lips."

"Hermione," said Connor, in a deep, betrayed wail. "You're supposed to be my friend. A Gryffindor. Why are you doing this?"

Hermione's temper flared abruptly. She wasn't sure why. Maybe it was the overdramatic self-righteous whining that Connor was doing right now. "Really?" she snapped. "I was under the impression that you didn't call your friends, and I quote, 'interfering busybodies who should know better than to think their brains give them the right to order everybody around.' I was trying to talk to you about my own perceptions, Connor. I wasn't some pawn of Harry's. And I won't be your pawn, either. You're an obnoxious, big-headed, unappreciative, idiotic moron who wouldn't know friendship if it bit him on the arse!"

The room was silent. Everyone was gaping at her, even Malfoy—all except Smith, who just turned to her and raised his eyebrows.

"And when did he call you that, Granger?" he asked.

"Two months ago," said Hermione starkly. "In Divination, when I tried to tell him about a subject I'd learned about in a—a private meeting. Yes, I was telling him because Harry asked me to, but it was the truth. You can't ignore the truth just because you don't like your brother!" The hurt rushed through her again. Connor had made no attempt to apologize about that remark, and neither had Ron. They both seemed willing to pretend it hadn't happened, instead. Hermione wished she could forget it, but she had an excellent memory, and years of

experience, in Muggle school, with people who'd insulted her in almost exactly the same terms. She'd tried to be a friend, and look what it had got her.

"And he never apologized?" Smith asked, his eyes flickering to Connor. "But he still wants to think of you as a friend? And he has the gall to think you should lie for him just because you're a Gryffindor?"

"No, and yes, and yes," said Hermione, glaring at Connor. He couldn't have looked more stunned if a Bludger had hit him in the head, she thought. Well, good. Maybe he can start growing up around everyone, not just Harry.

"Then I think your description of him was a bit off," said Smith, his tone clinical. It reminded Hermione of the way that her father discussed tooth problems in his patients. "I don't think he would appreciate friendship if it paraded naked in front of him, wearing a banner that listed the names of all the Gryffindor Death Eaters."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She laughed, and that seemed to be all that it took to break the frozen mood. Smith gave her a narrow smile that couldn't quite be called a grin. Malfoy snickered. Harry stood up straighter and turned to face his brother.

Connor snapped.

He drew his wand, yelling something about making her and Smith sorry they'd ever been born. Hermione didn't think she needed to make out the actual words. She knew their general gist. If Connor did read at all, she thought, it was bad Muggle novels with villains who twirled their mustaches.

She drew her own wand before he could get off a spell, aimed it coolly, and said, "Tarantallegra."

Connor began dancing. He yelped, and tried to keep his wand straight regardless, but it fell from his hand as his body gave a particularly violent jig. Smith and Malfoy were laughing openly now.

Harry said, in a desperate, resigned voice that made Hermione feel sorry for him, “Finite Incantatem.”

Hermione snorted in annoyance as the spell ended. She’d put a bit of extra force into her wrist when she cast that one, hoping it would make the spell last longer and resist the first application of Finite Incantatem. Of course, given how powerful Harry’s magic was, any chance of studying that was lost.

Connor’s legs came free, and he knelt down on the floor. Hermione could see his shoulders shaking, but wasn’t sure if he was merely shivering from the force of his reaction, or whether he was crying soundlessly.

Harry squirmed out of Malfoy’s arms and walked across the room to kneel beside his brother. He said something Hermione couldn’t hear. Connor didn’t move. Harry put out a hand to touch his brother’s hair, and Connor’s arm snapped out, knocking it away. Harry winced a bit and touched his wrist.

Malfoy hurled a spell at Connor then, but Hermione didn’t hear what it was in the midst of Harry’s barked, “Protego!” She watched in envy as the Shield Charm worked, popping up in front of Harry and Connor and deflecting Malfoy’s hex, whatever it had been, away. She had tried the Shield Charm several times so far, but she wasn’t getting it right. She didn’t know if she didn’t have enough strength for it yet, or if it was her wand movement or something else that got in the way.

Malfoy said in a tight voice, “Harry, come out of there. It’s hopeless. You have to see that—“

“It is not hopeless,” said Harry, in a voice that made Hermione think he thought it was but didn’t want to admit it. “And having anyone else here was a bad idea. I need time alone with Connor. Please, Draco, just leave.” He turned around and looked at Hermione and Smith. Hermione winced. His eyes were still resigned, not angry, and he looked incredibly weary. “Please,” he repeated.

Hermione nodded and backed out of the room, listening to Malfoy argue with Harry. She felt a deep stab of pity for them both. Malfoy

clearly despised Connor, and it couldn't be easy for Harry, having to choose between his friend and his brother.

She turned around once outside the room, this time towards the library. She really was going to go there and research how best to perform the Shield Charm.

"I can cast Protego perfectly," Smith announced from behind her.

Hermione turned and glared at him. Yes, he'd been funny in the classroom, but it was clear that he was still the same annoying pureblood git he'd ever been. "Good for you," she said tartly.

"And I can teach other people," Smith offered. He stretched a hand out in front of him as if admiring his fingernails. "At least, when they actually try and aren't hopeless idiots like the big-headed moron in that classroom."

Hermione hastily shut her mouth, because it was undignified to leave one's jaw hanging open. "I can try," she said quietly.

Smith nodded to her, giving her one of those cool not-quite-smiles. "Shall we, then? I know a quiet room where we can practice."

Hermione nodded back and fell in beside him. She supposed Connor wasn't the only one who might need to revise his prejudices.

"Because I asked you to, Draco, that's why." Harry could feel his self-control slipping. He wanted to comfort Connor and slap him both at once. He wanted to hug Draco back for his protectiveness and slap him for that hex. This time, he wasn't sore and sluggish in a hospital bed, and he actually could do something if Draco wanted to hurt his brother. He glared up at his friend from behind his Shield Charm, which he still hadn't lowered. "This is important to me."

"He'll hurt you again," said Draco, darkly. His wand hadn't moved.

Harry shook his head. "I can prevent that." He could, too. Wards wrapped right over his skin would work.

"Not physically," Draco insisted. "Mentally. You're going to have to listen to his stupid babbling. And then you'll come back to the Slytherin common room all self-doubting and needing to be reassured, Harry. I know it."

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I was under the impression that you didn't mind the reassuring, Draco," he said.

Draco blinked. "I don't," he said, and then scowled, as he realized he had just tumbled headlong into his own trap. Reluctantly, he put his wand away. "Sometimes I wish you hadn't learned to be such a good Slytherin, Harry," he muttered.

Harry laughed, and saw Draco's expression alter to one of concern. The laughter did sound bad, Harry had to admit, stretched and scraped thin. "I'll be along in an hour, Draco," he said. "I promise. And I'll tell you everything that happened after you left, and let you reassure me if I need it. Promise."

"What about the next lesson?" Draco still didn't seem inclined to move.

"I don't know," said Harry. This one was an unmitigated disaster, but that wasn't Draco's fault as much as Connor's. "It depends on how well this one goes."

Draco snorted and walked towards the door, pausing to look back over his shoulder when he was there. "He's hopeless, Harry," he whispered. "Too far gone for any teacher to reach, I think, and not worth what you're going to do to yourself trying to teach him."

Harry met his eyes calmly. "It's my decision. And he's my brother."

Draco sighed windily and left the classroom.

Harry sighed in turn and ran a hand through his hair. He felt tired already, and he hadn't even thrown much magic or spent time dodging around the room from hexes. Learning what Connor had said to Hermione probably made him weariest, followed by Connor's never-ending prejudice against Slytherins.

I think it would be easy to hate you, sometimes, he thought, as he looked down at his brother. You make my life harder, and I really don't need that right now. And you're so stubborn. And there are people around me who would be willing to care for me even if I didn't care for you. It's the first time that's ever been true.

But I can't give up on you. You're our hope for the future. The prophecy isn't going to choose anyone else just because we want it to. And I love you, Connor. It's exasperated love right now, but there it is. And how can I justify giving Death Eaters who killed and tortured people another chance, but not you?

My own morality scares me sometimes, Harry finished, and decided that was quite enough time spent in thought. He shook Connor's shoulder. This time, as he had expected, his brother didn't slap his hand away, but only curled inward more tightly.

"Connor," said Harry.

More curling.

Harry sighed and sat down beside him. He looked at the wall, not his brother. Looking at his brother brought too many emotions surging up, thick and choking, and he didn't know how to deal with them. He would just speak aloud for a while and see where that took him.

"I always knew that you were my little brother," he said softly. "Little, even though we're twins. And I fought to protect that innocence in you. Mum wasn't going to tell you about my training, but I could have. Remember all those nights we spent comforting each other when something ridiculous had gone wrong, when Mum or Dad got upset at us for something we didn't do, when Sirius played a prank that went just a little too far or Remus couldn't come and visit because of the full moon? Remember all the secrets we shared? I showed you the fairies near the wards, and you showed me the frog eggs you found near the pond. Remember how nervous you were when we came to Hogwarts? You didn't know how well you'd fit in with other people, because we'd been alone so far. You told me that you envied me for

my calmness. That wasn't calmness, Connor. That was purpose. I knew I was always going to be with you. The future was so clear."

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "And now, it's not. Well, it never was from the moment I went into Slytherin, but I wanted it to be. And you did make friends, and you did fit in. But now...now you don't.

"That's hard for you to understand, isn't it? Why people dislike you so much. You know that you're Gryffindor, and Gryffindor is more popular than Slytherin. You know that you're the Boy-Who-Lived, and you get attention paid to you, and you don't see why that attention should be negative. You know you're a hero, and the least everyone could do is thank the hero who saved them from Voldemort.

"But, Connor, it's more than that. Dad loves you because you're his son. I love you because you're my brother. Sirius and Remus love you because they've known you all your life. Mum loves you insanely, fiercely, intently. Dumbledore favors you because of the prophecy.

"But either that doesn't apply to other people, or they don't care as much. They can love you, Connor, but you can't just demand it of them. The Slytherins won't be evil because you want them to be. Hermione won't be your friend unless you apologize or make some other effort at being friendly towards her. I know Ron sticks by you, and the Gryffindors laugh at your jokes, but they're the only ones. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs are just as important as everyone else, and they're not going to laugh at your jokes.

"I don't know how else to explain this to you, Connor. The world isn't the way you think it is. Things are never simple. The sooner you can get that through your head, the better off we'll all be. If Sirius told you things were simple, he was lying. If Mum told you things were simple, she was lying. She ought to know how complicated she made her life, and mine, by teaching me to play sacrifice."

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "You know what? I think that's what I hate most out of what she did. I have no idea how much of the love I feel for you is real, and how much was trained into me. I have no idea how I really feel about you, and when

you're thirteen and you've lived with someone for your entire life, you're supposed to know, aren't you?"

He stood up and looked down at Connor, who still had his head bowed and his forehead resting on his knees. "I am going to continue teaching you," he said softly. "But I'd like to do it not just because you're the hope of the Light side, but because you're my brother and I love you. You're making that awfully hard right now."

He turned and walked to the door. He was halfway there when he heard a muffled sound behind him. He paused, but didn't turn around. That might well lose Connor his courage.

Connor was murmuring something, the same thing, over and over, and steadily raising his voice loud enough to hear. Finally, Harry could make it out.

"I'm sorry."

Harry released his breath, feeling as though he had just avoided running off a cliff. He still didn't turn around.

"I accept your apology," he said, and then gently left the classroom and shut the door behind him.

It's only a tiny sign of progress, he reminded himself as he made his way back to the Slytherin dungeons. Not a lot. There's an incredibly long way still to go.

But he's not hopeless, whatever Draco says. He's not.

He's my brother, and I love him.

Chapter Thirty-Five: Walpurgis Night

Had no one else spoken to him yet?

Millicent couldn't believe it. Then she recalled what she knew of her peers in Slytherin, and snorted. Oh, yes, of course she could believe it. After all, they mostly existed in some strange sort of limbo where they thought Harry could be trusted, and yet didn't want to reveal any of the secrets he would need to know to him. There was Draco, but the Malfoys hadn't joined in this celebration for years, disdaining it as too common and too plebian.

Too wild, Millicent thought, as she watched Harry composing a letter to Lucius Malfoy on one of the couches and Draco stretched out on the one nearest, watching him, is nearer the right word.

Well, she wouldn't allow it to continue. She waited until Harry twitched, indicating that he knew she was watching him, and looked up. Then she put on her most gracious smile, the one that her mother had taught her for welcoming Death Eater guests.

"Harry," she said. "Has no one invited you for tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night?" Harry looked blank. Draco, Millicent saw from the corner of her eye, had narrowed his gaze until it could have burned a hole through her—if Millicent was the kind of person who ever paid attention to Malfoy glares. She turned her head fully towards him and smiled, and Draco scowled and looked away.

"Yes," said Millicent, sitting down on the couch next to him. Harry moved to shield the parchment from her view. Millicent didn't care. She already knew it was a letter to Lucius, and beyond that, she didn't need the details of the truce-dance. At least, as her father would say, Lucius was no longer acting like an idiot. "This is April twenty-ninth, Harry. And tomorrow is April thirtieth." She leaned nearer to him and lowered her voice. "Walpurgis Night."

Harry's eyes widened behind his glasses. "That was where you went last year, then?"

Millicent nodded, impressed that he could connect the night last year that most of the Slytherins had quietly vanished from their common room to this date with such accuracy. They had done it the first year Harry was here too, of course, but he had been too absorbed in his brother to notice at all. Last year had been a bit better as far as Harry's attention was concerned, but they still didn't want to take the risk of inviting him. This one, Millicent fervently hoped, would finally see Harry taking the place he had to take if he was going to be more than an unbound house elf wandering around and getting into trouble. "Yes. We'll leave the school and travel to a—well, a place whose name you don't need to know if you don't come. It's a Dark wizards' holiday, or used to be. Some of them," she added, with a glance at Draco, "think themselves too good to celebrate it any more."

"It's a random holiday," Draco said darkly. "It makes no sense."

"It stands opposite in the year from Halloween," said Millicent. "That doesn't make it random, Draco."

"I don't understand what happens," Harry broke in gently. At least he wouldn't have to be taught the skills of graceful interrupting, then. Millicent favored that. The less they had to teach him, the sooner Harry could get out there and start doing things. "If it's just a party, why couldn't you have it here in your rooms?"

Millicent smiled, and Harry leaned a bit away from her. She guessed her smile was Adalrico's wild one, then, the one that said things were finally moving on some investment or intrigue he'd worked out. Well, she was his heir, so that shouldn't come as a surprise. "It's not a party, Harry. It's a festival. And...well. You know that on Halloween, there used to be a belief that the spirits of the dead came back, even if they weren't ghosts?"

Harry nodded cautiously.

"Well, you can't see the spirits of the dead unless you make the proper sacrifices, and very few wizards or witches are willing to make those any more." Millicent shrugged. "But everyone can see the magic of the dead. And that's what comes back on Walpurgis Night, Harry."

She knew from the brewing thunderstorm smell in the room that she'd caught him. Harry was possessed of magic, and possessed by it. He always leaned towards the most powerful spell someone else was practicing at the moment, and lifted his head if someone else's power flared out of control. Millicent didn't think he had any idea he was doing it, but she noticed, because she was observant.

"I don't know what that means, exactly," said Harry. "But I'd like to find out."

Millicent cheered silently, and inclined her head to him. "Then we'll take you with us."

"How do we leave the school?" Harry asked. "Don't the professors notice?"

Millicent gave him her mother's smile again as she stood. "Granger isn't the only one to have a Time-Turner, Harry."

As she walked away, she could hear Draco arguing with Harry behind her. Draco was repeating all the arguments the Malfoys had against Walpurgis Night, the reasons they had abandoned the holiday. It was too wild, it was too violent, it did nothing for anyone but make them drunk on magic and think they could conquer the world, and anyway, how could Harry want to be alone with several dozen Dark wizards and their children, at least some of whom would be Death Eaters?

Harry made a calm answer, and Millicent knew he would be coming. She supposed there was the small chance that Draco might come, too, for his sake, but she doubted it. The Malfoys were too proud, and the thought that someone else might see them look undignified, even for a moment, was anathema to them.

Draco could unbend for Harry in private, Millicent had no doubt, but not in public.

It seemed that Harry had recognized the same thing. At least, Millicent thought it from the glimpse of his letter to Lucius that she'd received when he carelessly moved his hand.

Well, really, she defended the action to herself as she started studying for Charms again. I'm a Slytherin. I don't really care what the letter says, but it might be good to know, someday.

"Harry, I wish you wouldn't," Draco whined. They were on their way back from the Owlery, where Harry had just attached his letter to Lucius to Hedwig's leg and asked her to carry it to Malfoy Manor.

"I know," said Harry. "But you can't always get what you want, Draco."

"Why not?"

Harry concealed a smile—grinning now would only encourage Draco to whine further—and shot him a sidelong glance. "You know, you can come with me. It doesn't seem as if you would be out of place at this celebration, given what it's meant to do."

"No." Draco's face had closed. He shook his head, his eyes remote. "It's...it's a Malfoy family tradition to stand back from this, Harry. We have our pride to maintain."

"Yes, I know," said Harry, and couldn't keep his lips from curling in a vicious smile as he thought of the letter he'd sent to Lucius.

He imagined Draco's father receiving the letter and blinking at the small silk pillow that Harry had sent along, plucked from a couch in the Slytherin common room. Then he would read the letter.

Dear Lucius:

I salute your choice of vernal equinox gift. I must consider carefully what it says about you, that you believe my family is my weakness, what holds me back, and that you would send me a gift capable of severing those ties.

I have sent you a gift that should allow you to do the same thing. When and if you unbend your stubborn neck and learn that some things are more important than Malfoy pride, the pillow should provide a comfortable resting place for it. It was designed to support someone

lying completely with a curved neck, not one straight enough to cost us both our sanity and our truce.

Our definitions of pride are very different, Lucius, and so are our definitions of family.

Merry Walpurgis Night.

Harry Potter.

"How do we get there?" Harry asked Millicent, as he waited with a milling group of Slytherin students later that night after dinner in the Great Hall. Blaise Zabini was in the group, and Pansy, and Marcus Flint, and everyone else on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and other students from other years whom Harry didn't know nearly as well. Draco had pointedly retired to their room earlier, as had Vince and Greg. Harry wondered if their families didn't celebrate the holiday, either, or if they were simply showing solidarity with Draco.

"This way," said Millicent, and unfolded her hand to reveal a smooth black stone. Harry thought it had been carved, but he wasn't sure. It rose in a tiny pyramid from a round base, looking rather like a half-melted candle. As he peered more closely at it, he saw it wasn't black, but a dark green.

"A Portkey?" he asked.

Millicent smiled slightly. "Not really. With a Portkey, there's always the chance that someone could intrude on the holiday whom we don't want there. A Light wizard, for example." She breathed on the stone, and traceries of silver ran down it, as if her breath had been frosty. "This calls out to the Dark magic in you, and pulls you to the largest concentration of Dark magic in Britain—which will be our Walpurgis celebration. Tonight, at least." She looked up and winked at Harry. "You wouldn't like some of the places it would take you other nights of the year."

Harry shuddered, staring hard at the stone. "Um, Millicent," he said quietly. "I'm not sure it will work for me. I haven't used that much Dark magic."

"You're thinking of Dark in terms of compulsion, the way that Professor Lupin taught us, aren't you?" Millicent asked. The strands of silver on the stone were pulsing now, spinning and writhing about. Harry found it hard to look away from it and focus on Millicent's face, but he made himself.

"Yes," he admitted.

"There's another sense of Dark, Harry," said Millicent calmly. "And it holds tonight. Dark magic is wild." She abruptly tossed the stone into the air.

It hung there like a small dark sun, though its rays were silver instead of gold. It spun faster, and faster, and faster, and this time Harry didn't think that he could pull his eyes away. He found himself bracing as if for a blow. His magic was creeping out of him, rising off his body like steam.

But that wasn't because he was afraid, he realized a moment later. The stone was calling to it, and his magic answered, stretching luxuriously. He could feel the magic from the witches and wizards around him doing the same thing. Blaise was trembling. Pansy hopped up and down in place. Millicent watched the stone with a slight smile, eyes half-closed as her power rose singing around her.

Then the silver slanted away from the stone like the Muggle fireworks Harry had seen once when his family visited his mother's sister, and came down around them, forming an enormous net, or cage. Harry had the impression that things were changing rapidly behind the silver bars, but he couldn't remove his gaze from the stone to make sure. The deep green was growing, absorbing his gaze, reminding him of the Forbidden Forest. He had the insistent urge to reach out and touch the stone, and he trembled. This was Dark magic of a kind he had never even considered, powerful and chaotic but not malicious.

"Here we are!"

Harry blinked, hard, and came out of his daze. They were standing in another place entirely, on a steep bank, thick with gorse and heather, which led down towards a clearing. A nearly full moon shone overhead. Harry turned and looked at the clearing, and caught his breath.

The clearing's grass was a deep, unnaturally smooth green, and the fire that blazed in the middle of it, giving the light to see it, was silver. Leaping ghostly flames intertwined with each other, now the color of frost, now pale gray, now the hue of polished Sickles.

Harry wondered if that was the reason that Slytherin's colors were green and silver.

"Come on!" Millicent yelled at him. Harry turned towards her and saw that she had caught the stone, or disposed of it somehow. She grabbed his wrist and tugged on it. Her face was flushed, her eyes glittering as if she had a fever. "No one else is here yet, so we get to claim the best spots."

The other students seemed to be thinking the same thing. They all but hurtled down the hill, laughing as though they were about to collapse in a moment. Harry staggered, but quickly regained his balance, and managed the run even with Millicent not letting his hand go. He found he didn't mind it. A subtle touch of hysteria had entered his mood. It was very, very easy, he found, not to think about his brother, or Draco, or being a vates, or any of the one hundred and one other things that he had to think about when at Hogwarts.

He felt free.

They reached the clearing, and their feet made no sound as they ran over the grass. Harry flung himself down in front of the fire with the others, and put out one hand. The flames licked just past it, now cool as a wolf's wet nose, now warm as its breath. Harry shuddered once, and then laughed again. He thought he laughed for a few minutes, but no one shrieked at him to stop, as they would have anywhere else. He rolled on his back—at some point Millicent had let go of his hand—and simply laughed and laughed until his breath came short and his throat was sore.

He took a deep breath, caught Millicent's eye, and asked, "Why am I feeling like this?" He meant it as an accusation, since after all she hadn't told him about this, but the effect was ruined when he was giggling like a maniac half the time.

"Because of the magic," said Millicent, almost matter-of-factly. At least her face was flushed as though the night around them were much colder than it actually was, though, or Harry would have felt inclined to hurt her for being so unaffected. "It's all around us. You're feeling it much more than anyone else, Harry, because you're so strong. You have your own magic to deal with, and the magic around us is drawn to you." She smiled slightly and inched nearer to him. "Right now, it really, really wants to make you feel happy."

Harry blinked and turned his head to study the fire. He was still smiling hard enough to make his face hurt, but at least he seemed to be back in control of his voice. The other Slytherin students were sprawled around the fire, talking to each other with a casual ease Harry had never seen them exhibit in the common room. One of them, a boy Harry thought was a sixth-year, gestured lazily, and a rock flew from the ground into his palms, where he began playing with it. Harry blinked again. He might still have trouble distinguishing the power from his mood, but it was clear that there was quite a bit of it in the air tonight, to let people perform wandless magic.

He wondered what he could do, but decided he should wait to experiment. He was almost stupefied with joy as it was.

He looked at Pansy, who was lying with her head resting on his shoulder, humming a nonsense tune. "Hey, Pansy?" It seemed to take forever for her to look at him, but she did, smiling. "Who lit the fire, if we're the first ones here?"

Pansy blinked slowly. "It lit itself," she said, and gave a careless shrug. "It always does." Abruptly, her gaze cut past Harry, and she sprang to her feet like a fawn. "Mum! Daddy!" she cried, and ran across the grass towards them.

Harry turned and saw the pair descending another slope than the one they had taken, moving slowly and regally. The clearing was really a dip in the land, he realized now, surrounded by hills on all sides.

Millicent tugged on him. "Come on. You should stand and greet Pansy's parents. You've formally allied with them, and you've done so much for Hawthorn, and you haven't met her father yet."

Harry nodded and ambled to his feet. Part of him wanted to force this drugged feeling out of his head. The other part was enjoying the relaxation, and allowed him to feel nothing stronger than curiosity as he went forward to meet Pansy's parents.

Hawthorn looked resplendent in a pale green gown, though when he got close enough, Harry could see that her face was still white and tired from the full moon a few days before. She turned and gave him a slight gesture as he approached, a cross between a bow and a curtsey. "Harry," she said, and looked proudly at the man on her arm. "This is Dragonsbane Parkinson, my husband and Pansy's father."

Harry turned and looked at Dragonsbane, and shock cut through some of the haze of the magic. The man was entirely wrapped in black cloth, from head to foot; only his hand was visible, where it rested on Hawthorn's arm, and his index finger bore a ring with a large, pale blue stone. The black cloth drifted as though caught by wind, though Harry could feel no wind blowing in most of the directions it drifted. There was a very faint smell around him, sickly sweet. Harry identified it after a moment as the smell of rotting flesh.

Awe replaced his shock. "You're a necromancer, sir?" he whispered.

"I am." Dragonsbane's voice was deep and smooth, with only a trace of an emotion. Harry couldn't tell what the emotion was, amusement or courtesy or curiosity or something else—though he assumed he would have already known if the man was displeased.

Harry went on staring. He hadn't expected to meet a necromancer. Few wizards became them anymore, since the sacrifices to do so were enormous. Dragonsbane would have to shield his face from the sight of anyone but his wife and children for the rest of his life. He

could only speak aloud on two nights of the year, Halloween and Walpurgis (though Harry hadn't been sure about the date of the second one, knowing next to nothing about Walpurgis). He would see how long every wizard or witch he met was destined to live, but was forbidden to speak of it. He would even have to give up his birth name, whatever it had been, choose a new first name, and take on the surname of the family he had married into. That would have been the reason Hawthorn made the alliance with him, Harry realized then; she was the one born with the Parkinson name.

At least, Harry thought in wonder, as he looked back and forth between Dragonsbane, whose eyes he could feel resting on him, and Hawthorn, who was beaming at him, he could understand now why Hawthorn's husband hadn't reacted badly when he found out that she was a werewolf. And he had his silent, nagging question answered, about what sort of wizard would be willing to marry the Red Death.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, sir," said Harry, finally remembering his manners. He only half-remembered the formal greeting that one gave to necromancers, since he had never expected to meet any. He hesitated, then decided that it was worth the risk. "I wish you basalt, and the ash of the volcano, and fires that no water can put out, and the black wind that blows between the stars."

Dragonsbane cocked his head, or at least Harry thought so. His clothing was so shapeless that it was hard to tell. "The dead approve of you," Dragonsbane whispered at last. "They have been talking about a magic rising that stirs their sleep. You are one of the components of that magic."

Harry suppressed a shiver, and nodded. "Thank you, sir." For a necromancer to respond at all to the greeting was a rare honor.

Pansy giggled at him. Harry saw that she had her arms wrapped around her mother's waist, and she was grinning in his direction. "You look as though you just met a ghost, Harry."

"I met one who speaks to them," said Harry, and bowed to Dragonsbane. "I am very glad to have seen you, sir."

Dragonsbane gestured once with the pale hand that had not let go of Hawthorn's arm. Harry made sure not to look too directly at the stone of his ring. "We will see each other again," he said. "And the next time but one is in a home of my kindred."

Harry nodded slowly, wondering when he would have occasion to visit a necropolis or a graveyard. "I'll remember that, sir."

Hawthorn smiled at Harry and led Dragonsbane down into the dell, whispering to Harry as she passed, "I am so glad that you could join us at last. It is time that you learned more about the Dark."

I suppose so, Harry thought dazedly as he watched them go. Pansy skipped back and forth between her mother and father, babbling like a child, her hands sometimes flashing in what Harry guessed was the sign language Dragonsbane would use to communicate with his family the rest of the year. He shook his head.

"Potter."

Harry turned swiftly. Other people had begun arriving while he talked to the Parkinsons, and while most of them had simply trailed past him with curious looks, it seemed that there was someone Blaise wanted him to meet.

"May I present my mother, Arabella Zabini?" Blaise said. He gave a stiff bow, then stepped out of the way.

Harry met the witch's eyes steadily, to be met with a quirk of her lips in return. Arabella, he knew, was a Dark witch who had never been a Death Eater, and she looked it. Her skin was smooth and utterly black, her eyes large and darker than Snape's. She wore her dark hair coiled in so many intricate braids around her head that Harry had no idea how long it was. She was easily the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

That beauty had snared seven husbands, one of them Blaise's father. They had all died, one by one. Supposedly it was of poison. There was no evidence incriminating Arabella Zabini, of course. There never was. The most the Ministry could do was hold her for a short

time and then let her go. On one of those journeys to the Ministry, Harry remembered, she had managed to get Sirius sacked.

“Mr. Potter,” she said now, and her voice had an odd musical quality to it that instantly made Harry alert. She extended her hand. “My son has told me so much about you.”

Harry warily took her hand, his eyes traveling her hair. Yes. There. A tangle of small bells coiled demurely around the end of one braid, bound so they wouldn’t jangle. They testified, to anyone who looked for them, that Arabella Zabini had mastered musical magic. She could use it in her voice, doubtless to seduce people and put them off their guard.

“Good evening, Mrs. Zabini,” he said, bringing his attention back to her face. “Are you going to sing for us later?”

Arabella’s eyes widened briefly, then narrowed, and a pleased smile appeared on her lips. “I had no idea that you had such superb taste in music, Mr. Potter,” she said.

“We have a Songstress among us,” said Harry, letting go of her hand and stepping back into a deep bow, while surreptitiously checking his hand to make sure that there were no small pinpricks on it, such as might come from spider bites or poisoned rings. “It would be crass of me not to suggest it.”

Arabella studied him in silence for a moment, then nodded. “It has been years since anyone dared to ask me to make music on a Walpurgis Night,” she said, putting the slightest emphasis on the verb. “I should be happy to, Mr. Potter.”

She gave him a calculating smile and swept past him towards the fire. Harry looked at Blaise, raising his eyebrows. Blaise’s jaw was hanging open, but he quickly shut it and nodded, a faint grin curling his mouth.

“You impressed her, Potter,” he said. “That’s damn hard to do.”

Harry let his breath out. “I’m glad.” His body was thrumming with energy now, and he didn’t know for certain how much had to do with the magic in the air. He felt as though he had just escaped alive through a deadly trap.

Of course, you knew it was going to be like this when you agreed to come, he reminded himself, turning back towards the circle of celebrants around the silver fire. Dark wizards and Death Eaters don’t make the best of company.

Yes, but no one said anything about the necromancer and the Songstress.

“Come on, Harry!” Millicent called. She was standing near Adalrico and a pale, blonde woman Harry supposed was her mother. “The festival is just about to get started!”

Harry shook his head, braced himself, and plunged back into the fray. Hawthorn stepped forward, her hands held in front of her. Harry thought she was cradling something, but he couldn’t be sure what it was. It sparkled and shifted and changed shape when he tried to focus on it. It was either silver or green, though, he was certain of that.

“This is Walpurgis Night,” said Hawthorn, her head lifted and her voice clear as it cut across the crowd of witches and wizards, stilling any chatter at once. “This is the night that the magic returns, the night when the magic renews, the night when the Dark cries out in its power. I claim the right to speak by virtue of having survived Darker magic than anyone else here this year.”

Her face turned haggard for the briefest moment, and then she shook her head and smiled, and it was gone. Harry glanced at Pansy, who was standing with her eyes fixed adoringly on her mother, and shook his own head. If someone had asked me before I met her, I would never have thought that the Red Death could smile like that, or that someone could love her so.

Hawthorn lifted her hands high. “There is magic coming again,” she said, voice growing clearer still, until it remind Harry of the cry of a

great bird. "There is power coming again. Some of that power stands among us now, not confined by compulsion in that poor understanding of Darkness that we know best, but free in a manner that we can only half-understand and must trust."

She cast her hands into the air, the whatever-it-was she held pinwheeling across the sky. It changed shape and burst as it expanded, and Harry finally made it out. It was a rain of flowers, with silver petals and green leaves. It was a flock of birds, their silver wings beating steadily around green bodies. It was a shower of dust, both silver and green, that lifted his head and his heart and shook him to the depths of his being.

"May we all be unbound!" Hawthorn cried.

The atmosphere changed as the flowers/birds/dust fell, from solemn to abruptly frenetic. Harry felt the dance begin, but he couldn't have said the moment when he was pulled into it. Suddenly his feet were moving, and wild music poured out of the air, coming from Merlin knew where, surrounding them and snaring them and pulling them on.

Harry found himself dancing opposite Hawthorn, who smiled at him and spun around, her gown and hair flying wildly, her face shining with a joy that was almost wolfish.

He found himself dancing opposite Millicent. She gave him a smug grin that said, "See? Aren't you glad that you came?" But the dance took her away again before Harry could make up his mind how to answer.

He found himself whirling in a tight ring with Arabella, who moved like a swan landing on the water. Harry heard the music shift, and was certain that she was adding her voice to it. She didn't stay long enough for him to be sure, only leaped and skimmed with her dark gown rising like wings, and then came down again and was gone.

He found himself dancing opposite Dragonsbane, and the music grew muted and he felt the intense cold of death brush against his fingers; they turned blue.

He found himself dancing opposite Pansy. For the first time since the article about the Ministry's anti-werewolf legislation appeared, she looked completely relaxed. She spun in a circle and clapped her hands above her head, sparkling trails of dark green and dark blue magic outlining her body, and Harry saw the witch she would become in that moment, several years on, graceful and confident as her mother was.

The dance continued until Harry couldn't tell when it had begun, though he was certain his feet ought to be more tired than they felt. He was broken from his utter trance when he heard ecstatic, wordless cries, mingled with a few names. He lifted his head.

Black silhouettes of beasts were springing down the hills, and curving through the air above them, and rising up from the ground, all moving towards the silver fire.

Millicent's words returned to Harry. "But everyone can see the magic of the dead. And that's what comes back on Walpurgis Night, Harry."

And, indeed, these did look like the odd form, half-snake and half-lizard, that Harry's magic had assumed in the Chamber of Secrets when it first broke free. He could make out the shadow of a dragon, and a trotting beast that looked like the bastard child of a unicorn and a thestral, and a fleeting shape that might have been a banshee. They swirled around the fire, joining with the dancers, brushing against them sometimes. Harry continued dancing, and wondered what would happen if one of them touched him.

He had the chance to find out when the dragon swerved in midair, stuck its silhouettes of claws out before it, and scraped them through his own shadow.

Gold sparkling so deep that it nearly sickened him and nearly made him sing, gold spinning itself out of the lead, gold springing and dancing as it finally answered the call of the potion he had made...

And then the dragon flew on, and Harry, his throat rasping with shock, found himself stopped, the dance having let him go at last. He stared

up at the memory, and shook his head. That had been the magic of an alchemist, then, one who had managed to turn lead into gold.

These were memories, he thought, all of them, though he didn't know of any way to distinguish which dead Dark wizards they belonged to.

The unicorn-thestral charged him, its horn spearing his shadow.

Serpents rising, hissing, calling, crowding around a pool of molten gold, piling on top of it in a wriggling, sliding mass, pulsing, shifting, beating like a heart, and then coalescing abruptly into an egg of heartstopping beauty...

Harry gasped as that one let him go. The magic shaped into the unicorn-thestral had been a Parselmouth's once, then, and still held the memory of creating a basilisk. He watched in wonder as it wheeled, tail swaying behind it like contours of ink, and sought another wizard to share the memory with.

Other witches and wizards around him cried out, or tilted their faces back and absorbed the memories in silence, or shook before them. Harry took a few steps forward, willing to seek out any who would speak to him, halfblood that he was.

They all spoke to him, or so he thought; it was hard to distinguish some of the shadow-shapes one from another. He caught glimpses of exquisite, unique potions; of magically-bred plagues; of spells that did three things at once; of people turning to stone statues from the gaze of a wizard who had given himself Medusa's abilities; of a wave rising hard and high enough to smash an island to pieces in a roaring storm; of a sword enchanted until it could cut the very air. All of those and more, and it felt as though the boundaries of his being rippled and expanded outwards, filled with a heritage he hadn't even known was there.

At last it ended, and the shadow-shapes leaped high and dived deep and ran fast and vanished. Harry noticed he wasn't the only one on the ground, shaking. Some of the wizards and witches had their hands over their eyes, and Harry heard low murmurs that sounded like prayers or curses.

Then Arabella Zabini began to sing.

Harry had never heard a Songstress; he had only read descriptions of their voices. It was nothing like the real thing.

Dark, the books had warned gravely, but Harry found that he willingly yielded his thoughts to be sculpted into new images. He, along with everyone else there, saw a hillside turned purple by the light of the setting sun, already scattered with bodies. He, along with everyone else, saw the blood among the flowers, and the Dark wizards retreating frantically before the Light ones, blocked by powerful Light artifacts from using their full power.

Dangerous, the books had insisted, but Harry presently couldn't see the danger as the notes plunged and twisted and turned, taking him into minds and whisking him out again, giving him glimpses of wives and sons and daughters and husbands and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, letting him see and understand those who were on the verge of dying.

The song rose, reaching steadily for its crescendo, and Harry felt his mood spin upward with it. Shining patches of light cut past him, reflected in darkness, as if he were underwater and swimming for the surface. The world trembled and splashed and broke apart, and he reached that surface.

The Dark wizards joined hands, sinking their feet into the earth and clasping their magic in an unbreakable wall. They shed fear, shed panic, resolved not to be ruled by it, and gave their trust to leaping wild magic.

The magic soared out of them, joyous, snarling, free, and ripped the Light wizards in half like a sweeping sword cut. Abruptly, the scene of battle on the hill by sunset changed from a victory for the Light to a victory for the Dark.

Harry found himself cheering as the song ended, along with everyone else, and blinked, sitting back. He probably shouldn't have been

cheering a scene of such violence, but it had seemed like the only sensible thing to do.

He glanced up, and met Arabella Zabini's gaze. She looked satisfied.

That was a test, Harry realized abruptly. She wanted to see how I would react to a scene of Light wizards being slaughtered.

He attempted to give back a glare that said his reaction was more an indication of her song's power than his sympathies.

She chuckled at him and turned away in a sweep of her dark gown.

Harry shook his head and stood, slowly, his legs wobbling. Millicent was beside him in an instant, whispering, "So what do you think?"

"I..." Harry shook his head. "How much more of this is there?"

Millicent laughed. "Not much more. Just one more major ceremony, and then it'll be done. Most of us stay for a little while, eating and talking, but we go back early to the school anyway, so we don't have to use the Time-Turners for more than a few rotations." She cocked her head at him. "No one would think badly of you for going back now," she whispered. "They're already impressed."

Harry shook his head again. "No. I want to see what this ceremony is."

Millicent said, as they walked back towards the center of the circle where the silver fire blazed, "You know, Harry, you would make a very good Dark wizard."

Harry chose to ignore her.

By the time they reached the fire, the ceremony had already begun. At least, he thought that was why there was a circle of absolute blackness on the grass in front of the fire, slowly pulsing and expanding. The wizards and witches who had come to celebrate stood around it, moving back only slightly as it consumed more and more of the grass.

Abruptly, the circle extended upward as well as across, rising into a tall, slender black cylinder. Harry stared at it hard, and shivered. His eyes ached just trying to pierce the blackness.

The shape focused itself some more, and then a shape like an awning molded out from the top. Harry squinted, but still didn't know what it was until it stopped moving. A doorway.

Hawthorn stepped forward, her voice gone back to the clear one that she had used at the start of the evening. "This is the circle of unbinding. Whoever goes into this is entirely unbound, entirely free, for one instant—body, magic, mind, heart, and soul." She paused for a moment, her eyes cutting across the crowd. If they lingered on Harry, he really didn't feel it. "There is, of course, the possibility that you will not come back to yourself," she added softly. "But perhaps vanishing is worth it, for the one moment of perfect freedom."

Shit, Harry thought, as he stared at the black thing. He could hardly risk death, not when other people needed him so much.

But the temptation to enter it was present from the moment Hawthorn finished speaking, and even in the silence that followed, when everyone else regarded the cylinder with solemn expressions and made no move.

"Does someone have to enter it?" Harry whispered to Millicent.

Millicent shook her head. "No. This is the part of the ceremony that most often gets neglected, in fact. It does kill people." She leaned towards him earnestly. "It separates you entirely, Harry. Every part of you. It detaches your soul from your body, and your magic from your mind, and so on. And whether it puts them back together...well, that's up to you, really."

Harry stared at the dark thing. It sat there. "How long before it vanishes?"

"An hour," said Millicent. "We can go back to Hogwarts—"

"No," said Harry, and stepped forward. His heart was pounding crazily. He could see almost nothing but the doorway, but he was aware, in other ways, of the gazes swinging to embrace him, of Millicent's expression—not quite awe and not quite pride—as she helped him forward, of Hawthorn stepping out of the way.

"You risk your life freely?" Pansy's mother asked him.

"I do," said Harry, and then he stepped forward and through the doorway before his caution could eat his desire to be free.

He whirled free.

He found himself drifting in darkness, with a gulf beneath him and on either side so vast and terrible that his mind would break trying to comprehend it. So he didn't try to comprehend it. He drifted, and gazed down and up and around until the directions broke, and he could no longer tell which was which.

It didn't matter which was which. They were only part of his human perception. He closed his eyes, or he opened them, and he whirled.

He whirled, bound to a wind, cutting beneath small points of light in a blackness so huge that it made his soul ache. Stars, he thought, and this is the black wind that rides between them. Whenever he looked up at night, the impression he had was of millions of stars, but now he realized how wrong that was. His eyes sought out the stars only because they were prejudiced by being able to see light. In truth, darkness was the vaster creation, space unending and wondrous, empty void with nothing to fill it but more darkness. And darkness always came, unspent, inexhaustible, created and born and generated of itself in a way that light would never manage.

There was darkness before there was light, and there will be darkness when the light is all gone.

There was darkness in his heart, too, despair and hatred and rage that he had fought so hard to suppress. Harry found himself gazing at those emotions, and he was unafraid. Yes, they were there. Yes, he would feel them. Yes, he could see the fine cracks running through

his conceptions of the universe, places where someone could hit him and fracture him. But they were whole and unbroken as yet, and he was free to look at them and accept them calmly.

He climbed as if he had wings. Webs seethed around him, and Harry knew them all, the webs of his ordered thoughts. He touched them and crawled them and felt the sheer stickiness of them, and was unsurprised to see how many of them led back to Connor, even now. That would change. His mind was already changing, moving into the forest where strange and wild creatures could run. That meant the webs would have to find new places to attach, and if those places were still on Connor, then Harry would be more than surprised.

He danced among his magic, which refused to form one beast as the magic of the dead wizards had, or one memory, but formed many, all alive, all shifting, pulsing, changing like the snakes in the vision of the basilisk egg. From moment to moment they changed, from moment to moment they were different, and Harry caught glimpses of what his magic could do, and he laughed in wonder, and again he was unafraid. It was not the same thing as courage, this unfear, being far calmer. He didn't have to brag or fear what he could do, because he knew.

He couldn't keep hold of the insights. They whirled away from him, flew away from him, danced away from him, and he spun back together, bindings once again taking hold, body and mind and soul and magic and heart to each other.

He found himself on the grass, on his knees, on the other side of the black cylinder. Harry took a deep breath and climbed slowly to his feet, then walked around the cylinder to join the witches and wizards again. The silver fire was almost out, he noted.

They stared at him solemnly, and then they began nodding, and whispering, their voices like wind in a large grassy plain.

Harry found it easy to ignore them. He stared at the stars, his gaze this time picking out the voids between them instead of the points of light. Had he really ignored darkness that easily, all his life? Had he

really disdained Dark magic as only compulsion, and Light magic as only free will?

It was more complicated than that. Dark magic was also wild, and Light magic was also tame. And yes, compulsion and wildness did not seem to sit side by side easily, but they were both true.

Harry's eyes came back from the heavens when Millicent touched his arm. She was smiling at him softly.

"A bit of refreshment, and then we'll go back to Hogwarts," she said.

Harry nodded, and let her pull him back into the circle of chattering Dark wizards and witches, part of him still free and gone flying.

Chapter Thirty-Six: You Cannot Afford Not to Listen

Snape closed his eyes, ground his right front teeth into his right bottom teeth, and tried to think of something he could say that would make an impression on the irritating child in front of him.

"Harry," he said finally.

Harry glanced up from brewing Wolfsbane, his eyes wide and attentive. His hands never stopped selecting, stirring, and mixing. He had done it so often now that he might be able to do it in his sleep. Snape didn't understand why Harry wouldn't brew some of his own and sell it to other werewolves who wanted it. Dumbledore would pay for the ingredients gladly, since he would take it to mean that Lupin had definitely committed to staying with them for the next year. Meanwhile, Harry could be making some money of his own, independent of the Potter fortune that he might never see.

But Harry had said he wouldn't steal from Dumbledore or Snape, and that he would prefer to give the potion away. Give it away! Snape sometimes wished that the boy's inner Slytherin had sucked a bit more of the Gryffindor out of him.

But that is not what you are supposed to be worrying about, he reminded himself, and looked sternly back at Harry. He suspected that the boy's magic might have begun to reach out and wind his thoughts in vines, turning them away from any greater source of irritation towards a lesser. They would have to work on that. Snape did not intend to be subject to any form of compulsion, no matter how minor, largely because of how it would devastate Harry when he found out.

"You left the school," he said, this time keeping his voice free of inflection. "You promised me you would ask me for permission before doing that."

Harry froze for a moment, then carefully added the demiguise hairs to the portion of the potion he was working on and stepped away from the cauldron before turning to face Snape. "I'm sorry about that, sir," he said. "I forgot."

Snape drew in another breath of air. This was something else he had been meaning to address, but it had to wait for the proper time. Being beside himself with rage when he'd first heard about Harry's little jaunt in the company of the purebloods for Walpurgis Night would only have led to something unfortunate. So he'd waited until he thought he could be calm.

And now he was. He was, he assured himself. But he was also disturbed, and by something far more important than the fact that Harry had been outside Hogwarts for an unspecified period of time.

"Harry," he said, "you still do not think twice about risking your life."

Harry flushed. Snape wondered, narrow-eyed, exactly what had happened at the celebration. Millicent had refused to let Harry tell either Draco or Snape, saying it was a private matter between those who'd attended. Harry had seized on that excuse a little too eagerly for Snape to think it meant anything good.

"I'm not as reckless as I was earlier in the year," Harry protested. "Really. I sensed a bunch of webs in myself when I lost the phoenix web, but I didn't cut at them. Only the one, to release my magic-feeding ability."

Snape shook his head slowly. "It is not the recklessness I am speaking of. It is the thoughtlessness." He heard his voice descend, becoming icy, and realized he was angry after all. Well, Harry will just have to deal with it. This should have been solved long since. "You do not risk your life or your sanity quite as often or quite as suddenly. You think about it first. But you still do not think about the danger."

"I do so!" Harry's eyes flashed, and Snape felt the first faint beginnings of a headache. "I weighed what you would think of me dashing into my own mind the way I had into Remus's. And I do consider what you and Draco would feel if I died."

"That is not what I meant." Snape rubbed his forehead. His own emotions were back to weary resignation. He didn't think it was Harry's mind influencing him after all, but the simple fact that he was

trying to be a guardian to the third most powerful wizard in Britain, who also happened to be a child recovering from abuse.

Harry stared at him.

"I mean," said Snape, "thinking about your own life. You have no self-preservation instinct, Harry."

More puzzled silence.

"Staying alive for yourself," Snape clarified. "You think of what would happen to me or Draco or Lupin or your brother if you died." And that was progress. Snape had to admit he preferred being on Harry's list of "people who might be hurt if Harry Potter were to meet a sudden demise" to Connor Potter being the only entrant. "But you do not think of your own life as worth anything unless you can spend it serving or defending or protecting others."

Harry sighed. "You know that's the way my mother raised me, sir—"

"I fear that you will never overcome it if you do not begin to see it as a problem," Snape interrupted him. He knew his ward's patient tone. Harry would manage a reasonable explanation that would make Snape think the problem had been solved until five minutes after he walked out of the room, whereupon Snape would realize the explanation solved nothing at all. That tendency had only become worse in the few days since he returned from Walpurgis Night. Sometimes, Harry could not be allowed to be as mature as Snape knew he was. "You must begin to value yourself for yourself, Harry. Not just for what you can do for others, not just as someone whom anyone else would be sorry to see die, but for yourself."

Harry blinked at him. Snape fought down the temptation to simply snarl insults until they broke through the mask of indifference. It wasn't a mask, and if he wasn't good at this, then at least he'd known what kinds of things he was letting himself in for when he agreed to be Harry's guardian.

"I do, sir," said Harry at last, just as Snape was about to speak again.

“Do you?”

Harry nodded. “Of course, sir. I like being alive. I take pride in what I can do. I would much rather be alive than dead.” He paused, his head tilting slightly to one side. “Isn’t that what you mean, sir?”

“Yes, and no.” Snape wished irritably that Dumbledore had not turned into a complete fool where the Potter twins were concerned. He would have been able to frame the issue with words that made sense and taught Harry to see exactly what he wanted him to see. Which is the problem. Harry would not like that. At least I know he prefers my stumbling honesty. “Is there any cause you would not risk your life for, Harry?”

“Dumbledore’s,” said Harry at once.

“But he wishes to protect your brother and defeat Voldemort,” said Snape. “What other cause does he have?”

“The cause of enslaving me.” For a moment, there was enough bitterness in Harry’s voice that Snape felt himself relax. If Harry could only hang onto it... But then it was gone again, and Harry was shaking his head. “I have to remain free.”

“Why?”

“So I can teach Connor, and brew the Wolfsbane Potion, and figure out some way to fight the Death Eaters, and—“

“Harry.” Snape strode over until he stood in front of Harry, and compelled the boy to pay attention to him by the simple expedient of staring him down until he did. “You need not do everything. Trained Aurors cannot find Bellatrix and her companions.” And if he had private nightmares about them catching Harry or himself, those were no one’s business. “You can take some of your life to do other things.”

“Such as?” Harry folded his arms.

Snape hated that damn mature look, at least when Harry was using it to fight him. And this wasn't even fighting; it was Harry assuming the attitude of a parent. That made Snape doubly hate it. "Whatever you like to do," he said. "Play Quidditch."

Harry shrugged. "I don't enjoy it as much anymore. It takes time away from my training Connor and planning."

Snape ground his left teeth together. Much as he had to admit the bargain of teaching Connor was good since it placated Dumbledore, he still thought Harry's brother a lost cause. "Not that, then. Cast spells for fun."

Harry gave him that impossibly gentle and impossibly infuriating look. "I don't have time, professor. I can't afford to use my magic for frivolous things. I might get addicted to the power. Besides, I'm busy learning spells that can be useful in the war."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

Harry let the mask slip a bit, let his bewilderment peek through. "Advanced defensive and offensive spells, sir. I told you I was going to start studying them. And medical magic. I can heal broken bones now," he added with a hint of pride. "Wouldn't that be useful on the battlefield?"

"Why would you not leave that up to Madam Pomfrey?" Snape demanded.

Harry cocked his head. "Why, sir? She'd be in Hogwarts, and probably far from any battle scene. The Death Eaters aren't going to make attacking the castle their first priority. The wards are too strong. They'll be fighting further away. I'm more mobile than she is, and I'm stronger."

Snape slowly shook his head, unable to find words to express his dismay. What did Harry do for fun? He realized he didn't know. He would have studied all during his childhood; he didn't appear to know how to read for pleasure. Quidditch was something Snape and Draco

had forced him into, much as he loved flying. Magic was always to be used for something else. It didn't help that most of Snape's childhood leisure time had been spent inventing nasty intrigues and even nastier potions or spells. He didn't have any idea what normal children did for fun. And Harry was not a normal child.

At the same time, he thought it sad beyond the words he didn't have that Harry was the one thinking calmly of battle tactics, and training as though he fully expected to go out and die the day after tomorrow.

This summer, he thought, suddenly seized by inspiration. The end of the term is only a few weeks away. He will spend the summer here with me—I would not dare take him to Spinner's End, not with the Death Eaters abroad—and perhaps Draco, if that can be arranged with Lucius and Narcissa. His brother will be gone back to his Mudblood of a mother. We can teach Harry how to have fun.

It was appalling, really, how much that thought pleased him.

"Make sure that you rest," was all he could say to Harry now. "Make sure that you take some time to relax."

Harry blinked once, and then his face lit up. "Of course! Because I have to be rested and have a relaxed mind to fully understand my training," he said. "Of course, sir. I understand. Thank you for the reminder." He smiled at Snape and all but bounced out of the office.

Snape made a grumbling noise in his throat and turned to the pile of books that he had acquired from the Department of Magical Family and Child Services. He had wanted them for another purpose, but they should serve this one: teaching him what children raised pureblood did beyond dance and watch each other like hawks.

"All right," said Connor suddenly. His lip was bitten from trying to stay silent in the face of Draco's taunts, and his cheeks were red, and his eyes looked as though he hadn't got enough sleep lately to do anything more than shamble around, for all that he was glaring at Harry. Harry reminded himself again that some of those things were the inevitable consequences of having his brother and his best friend in the same room. "Say that I do believe you, and not all Slytherins are evil."

Harry blinked and licked his own lips. He had been giving Connor another lecture for an hour already, and to break through Sirius's training so suddenly was not what he had expected. "Yes?" he said.

"Then tell me why Salazar Slytherin left a Chamber of Secrets in the middle of the school, and a monster who could kill Muggleborn students!" Connor said triumphantly. "He must have been evil. He could actually condone the murder of students, and he helped found the school. Why would anyone who comes out of his House be good?"

Harry shook his head slowly. "Connor. Do you really think like that? Or do you have a mad gnome in your head who starts yelling whenever you hear the word Slytherin in any form?"

Connor flushed further, but said, "Answer the question, Harry."

Harry knew he shouldn't. It was only an hour. It was only a display of the same kind of stubbornness that Connor had shown before. And he had apologized last time. He'd come to the lesson without prompting this time. He'd ignored most of Draco's insults. They were making progress.

But Harry did it anyway, and lost his temper.

"Slytherin may have been evil," he snapped, leaning forward. He felt Draco jump and look at him in what was probably excitement. Harry didn't care. "But that doesn't mean that everyone who comes out of his House is. Fuck, Connor, don't you get it? If you really think that a founder's character is passed down to everyone in his or her House, then you can't explain Gryffindor Death Eaters. Because how could they be evil, if Godric Gryffindor was so pure and good?" He was yelling by now, halfway across the abandoned classroom to his brother.

Connor folded his arms. "I didn't say Gryffindor was perfect," he said. "But he was good. And most of the House is good, with just a few bad apples. But Slytherins are all evil."

“You great git.” Harry felt his magic stir around him and reach out towards Connor in interest. He tried to clamp down on it, but his temper flared again when he saw Connor just smirking at him, as if to say that Harry’s little display proved his inane theory. “I gave you a list of Slytherins who weren’t evil earlier, and you agreed with me!”

“They aren’t perfectly evil,” said Connor. “But they’re still evil.”

“You said they weren’t!”

Connor shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Harry, Harry, Harry. You don’t understand. You can judge someone’s general character by their House. That means that Gryffindors are generally good and Slytherins are generally evil. So sometimes you get a few Gryffindors who falter. It happens.”

“Then you should get some Slytherins who shine, too,” Harry said. He barely recognized his own voice. “That’s the outcome of this supposed logic of yours. Say it, Connor!”

“I’m not going to lie,” Connor said, his face turning closed. “You can’t make me.”

Harry flung out one hand, and his magic lashed and grabbed Connor, lifting him off the ground and pinning him to the wall. Connor’s eyes promptly went wide, but he held still. Harry wondered if he thought it would be a good idea not to anger Harry further, or if the weight of the power on his limbs simply wouldn’t permit him to move.

“I don’t care what Sirius told you,” Harry said. “Sirius isn’t Merlin. He isn’t even Dumbledore. He’s not right all the time—half the time—a quarter of the time. Slytherins aren’t evil. Gryffindors aren’t good. What the fuck do I have to say to get this through to you?”

Connor’s face went pale, but he simply hung there for long seconds. He seemed to be thinking. Harry glared up at him, and kept the hope out of the glare. Perhaps his brother was, after all, changing his mind.

Connor looked directly at him. And Harry saw the flash of understanding there. Connor knew he was telling the truth.

But his face closed again in the next instant, and he began what Harry knew was a lie. "Sirius didn't tell me anything like that. He just hinted, and I came to the understanding on my own. I told you what I think about Slytherins, and about Gryffindors. Those are my own opinions."

Oh, no you don't, brother mine, Harry thought. "Sirius did tell you those things," he said, and Connor's face could have been made of milk.

"He did not," he said, with an undertone of desperation bubbling in his voice. "I came to them on my own. I told you. I'm the stupid one. Isn't that what you always think about Gryffindors?"

"I do," said Draco.

"Draco," said Harry, his magic curling around him like the mad tentacles of the Squid, "could you please do me a favor, and shut up right now?"

Draco shrugged and shut up. That didn't dim the expression of enjoyment on his face when he watched Connor held in mid-air, but Harry supposed he couldn't ask him to stop smiling.

Harry turned back to Connor. I should have suspected this before. Connor's never this stubborn on his own. He's only this stubborn when he's protecting someone...

Just like me.

"Connor," he said, "I promise I'm not going to hurt Sirius. Just tell me what he said to you. And tell me why you think I would hurt him," he added.

"No," said Connor, and he was sweating, his eyes glazed and wild. Harry felt him straining against the weight of magic on his limbs, and

it was now obvious that he couldn't move. "He told me. And it—" He slammed his mouth abruptly.

"Connor—"

"No!"

Connor's magic turned wandless and fought against his own, and Harry knew he couldn't hold his brother much longer without damaging him. He relaxed his grip, and Connor slid gently down the wall and landed on his feet. He immediately stood up and ran to the door, his eyes on Harry as he opened it.

"I'm going to Dumbledore," he said. "I'm going to tell him what you did. He won't make me have lessons with you now."

He slipped out and shut the door behind him.

Harry made himself relax by degrees, and glanced at Draco. Draco's face was somewhere between smug and concerned.

"That went well," he said, when he caught Harry's gaze.

Harry shook his head and put his head in his hands. One bad side effect of Walpurgis Night was that he saw Connor from more of a distance than ever. He kept seeing more and more of his brother's faults—the stubbornness, the blind trust in everyone who was Gryffindor unless they "turned against him" the way Hermione had, the refusal to apologize or admit he was wrong even when he knew he was, and the clinging to his own status as the Boy-Who-Lived.

He'd felt uneasy about that all week, but for the first time, the idea really formed in his mind, in so many words:

If Connor's the Boy-Who-Lived, then Voldemort's already won.
"Go to bed, Harry," said Hermione, pausing behind him in the library.

Harry blinked and looked up from the book he was reading. He scowled at her. "Listen to your own advice," he said, nodding to the enormous pile of books in her arms.

"I am going to bed," Hermione retorted. "I just have a bit of light reading to do first. But you look half-asleep on your feet, Harry."

"I'm sitting down."

"Harry."

Harry rubbed his face. It was true that he was tired, and if one of the other Slytherins had been with him, he would have been hustled and poked and prodded and taunted into going to bed already. But he had created an illusion of himself and left it in the common room again. He simply had to have some time to research the phoenix web, and try other methods of getting it out of Peter's head. Draco and Millicent and the rest seemed to think that because Dumbledore had called a halt to Connor's lessons for a week to "cool everyone's head" and find out why Connor had thought Harry would hurt Sirius, Harry would have more time to rest. Harry knew better. He wanted to use the time for productive things.

On the other hand, if he was tired enough, he would probably miss some vital thing in the books.

"Just one more hour, Hermione," he muttered. "Please."

Hermione sighed at him, shook her head, and made her way out of the library. Harry dived back into the book. It was a more general one, containing hints on Occlumency and Legilimency as well as mind-webs. If Snape or Draco came and chided him for reading it, Harry could say that he was just striving to understand his own thoughts.

He flipped the page, the text blurring before his eyes, and took off his glasses. Surely the text wasn't blurring because he was tired. That was silly. He hadn't reached the stage of exhaustion where he felt like a wet rag yet, and that was the one where his eyes burned. It was just a smudge on his glasses. He wrapped and rubbed them in his shirt, then put them back on and peered at the page.

...common myth that Legilimency can be used this way, just as it is a common myth that the Soul Strength Spell can be used on a child...

Harry sat straight up, his heart pounding. He suddenly wasn't tired anymore. He leaned forward and read the passage three times, until he was absolutely sure he was seeing what he had thought he had seen.

It is a common myth that Legilimency can be used this way, just as it is a common myth that the Soul Strength Spell can be used on a child. In truth, Legilimency on a truly unconscious person is impossible, though it can sometimes be used with those who have gone into comas with magical causes. In the case of ordinary unconsciousness, however, the thoughts shut down and are too malformed for the Legilimens to tell what they are. She will find herself caught in a web of dreams, and is likely to stumble unless she has experience in one of the dream-reading arts.

Similarly, the Soul Strength Spell, commonly used to test the strength of character that may let a person endure a certain specified task, cannot be used successfully on any child younger than twelve, and there have been arguments for not using it on anyone younger than fifteen. A child's character is too unformed, full of drifting thoughts and influences that the spell is unable to recognize. Sometimes, it will return a false answer. Most often, the spell simply does not work.

Harry leaned back and stared at the ceiling, catching the book automatically when it tried to slip from the table. He didn't want it to thump and alert Madam Pince that he was still here.

Peter had claimed that Dumbledore had used the Soul Strength Spell on Harry and Connor before he made Peter into Sirius's sacrifice, and determined from its answer that Harry could better stand being the sacrifice than his brother. According to this book, that was impossible, since Harry and Connor hadn't even been two years old yet.

So Harry was left with two possibilities, neither of which he liked.

First, that the spell had returned a false answer, and Harry was not actually stronger of soul than Connor was—or, in the case of the question that Dumbledore had asked, not actually meant as a sacrifice.

Harry backed quickly away from the gulf he could sense opening in his thoughts with that answer, and looked at the second one.

The second one was that Peter had been lying.

But why? Harry thought, closing his eyes. What would he gain from it?

He snorted to himself a moment later. Can you ask? My belief, my trust. He's an escaped Azkaban prisoner, Harry, and one I'd been told all my life was evil. He had to have something to tell me in order to get me to trust him.

That didn't mean that everything he'd told Harry was false, of course. But it did send a shiver of unease across Harry's mind.

He took a deep breath and stood. Everything else in Peter's story had sounded true; Dumbledore certainly hadn't denied it. And Peter had risked his life for Harry several times. Until Harry found another piece of evidence, he would not let himself think that Peter was false.

But that meant he needed to confront the other possibility—that the spell had returned a false answer.

The suspicion raced through his mind like a jagged crack, and joined with his thoughts about Connor from earlier in the week. Harry shuddered once, and then cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself so he could slip past Madam Pince.

He had to see Snape, right away.

Snape groaned as a sharp rap sounded on his office door. That someone was bothering him near—he glanced at his clock—eleven at night was insane. And he knew it couldn't be Harry, because he'd checked on Harry just half an hour ago, and found him peacefully asleep in his bed.

Snape called, "Enter," braced for it to be Dumbledore with word of some emergency, or Minerva wanting to discuss the Slytherin-

Gryffindor scuffle that had happened earlier in the Great Hall, evolving into a full-blown food fight.

It was Harry, becoming visible as he opened the door. From his face, he hadn't been to bed at all. Snape discovered he wasn't too tired to feel rage.

"What have you done?" he hissed, rising from behind his desk. "If you tell me that you cast another illusion of yourself—"

"I cast another illusion of myself," Harry said.

Snape narrowed his eyes, pondering if he were actually angry enough to ban Harry from playing in the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff this weekend. It might cost them the Quidditch Cup if he did, but Harry would certainly know how seriously Snape took his crime.

"But we don't have time for that right now," said Harry, and came a step forward. His eyes were wide, his face pale, and when he turned his head, his fringe swished aside enough for Snape to see that the lightning bolt scar on his face was brilliant. "I just found out something that made me worry."

Snape let his anger retreat to the back of his mind, inside one of the quicksilver pools he usually used to contain his magic. He gestured Harry to a chair and sat down opposite him. He hadn't forgotten Harry's punishment, but it could wait, and be all the more devastating when his ward had forgotten about it.

"What was it?" he asked.

Harry swallowed. "I found out—or thought I did—from Peter that Dumbledore cast the Soul Strength Spell on me and Connor when we were babies, and that was how he knew who would be the best sacrifice. That was how he knew for certain that Connor would be the Boy-Who-Lived, too. I was the stronger of soul, and I wouldn't crack if I was asked to protect my brother."

"That is impossible," Snape interrupted, unable to keep silent any longer. "The Soul Strength Spell does not work on infants."

"I know," Harry whispered. "I just read that." Snape quelled the urge to say something about Slytherins who not only lied to their Head of House about where they had been at night, but also used that time to read more than was necessary. "But, Professor Snape, that means a few things." He took a deep, dragging breath, and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Peter was lying, maybe, and if so, I don't think I should be alone with him any more."

"I never thought you should," Snape could not resist pointing out.

Harry gave him a distracted nod. "Or Dumbledore lied about casting the spell," he whispered. "Or the spell returned a false result. And if either of those two things are true, then..." He trailed off and stared past Snape.

Snape followed the course of his mind easily enough. Two leaps and a jump, and one was there.

Dumbledore had no guarantee outside the prophecy that Connor and Harry were meant to play the roles he said they were.

No one had actually been at Godric's Hollow the night of the attack—except Voldemort, whom they certainly couldn't ask.

That meant that Harry could, possibly, be the Boy-Who-Lived.

Snape watched his ward's face grow paler and paler, and suppressed his triumph. Harry would misunderstand a smile now. "What makes you think this?" he asked. "Surely one lie is not enough to bring down something you have believed in your entire conscious life."

"Because," said Harry, and choked for a moment. Then he looked up. "Because Connor's an idiot."

Snape told himself he could smirk later, and only nodded gravely, imploring Harry to continue.

Harry sprang to his feet and started pacing in front of the chair. "Because he isn't that magically powerful," he said. "Oh, I know the Boy-Who-Lived isn't going to kill Voldemort that way, but at the moment, I don't see how he could survive a duel with him long enough to kill him any other way. I've tested his power, and it's at its strongest when he's most frantic—which isn't going to work in a battle. And he's not very compassionate, either. He demands absolute loyalty and love from others, but if they do something that he thinks of as a betrayal, he turns on them without further compunction. He doesn't forgive. He doesn't think of the future. He isn't interested in doing all sorts of things, like learn history and the pureblood dances, that would make him a better Boy-Who-Lived." Harry turned and glanced sidelong at Snape. "He doesn't love people very often."

The smirk would not be restrained. Snape was only thankful that Harry was too distracted to take it personally. "And because of that..." he prompted.

"Because of that," Harry muttered, "I don't know how he could be someone whose innocence and purity are essential to bringing down Voldemort. I was the sacrifice to make sure he stayed pure, but all kinds of impurities were apparently there already." He laughed, and it was the laugh that Snape always hoped he would never have to hear again.

"Surely you do not blame yourself for that," Snape said.

Harry gave him an odd look. "Of course not. Not even I can be responsible for what got mixed into his character when he had the happiest and most peaceful upbringing we could conceive of." He sighed. "I should have told him the truth, yes, and I wish I knew just how much I love him, but I don't think that would have necessarily made him more loving. He's known all his life that he's the Boy-Who-Lived, and the past few years that he would have to work harder, and he still doesn't."

Snape nodded, and felt triumph irradiate him. "And what other signs are there?" he asked. He could give them to Harry, but he knew Harry learned best when he came up with them for himself. Besides, that

would make it harder for him to hide from them later, if he started regretting that he'd ever thought this.

Harry sighed and swept back his fringe on purpose this time, to touch his scar. "This bleeds," he said. "And I have prophetic dreams that are usually connected with Voldemort somehow—I think," he added. "I never did find out what the dreams I was having this year were about. But I dreamed about Quirrell. And Tom—Tom Riddle said there was a connection between us." Harry closed his eyes. "I always thought it meant that I had a bond to my brother, and Riddle was connected to me through his connection to Connor. But...maybe not."

Snape cleared his throat. He did have a bit of information to offer, something Harry could not have known. "There is one person who might be able to tell you the truth, Harry."

"Who?" Harry whispered, his eyes flaring open.

"Pettigrew," said Snape. "Dumbledore told me once that there were two people who could have told us for certain what happened when the Dark Lord attacked you: the Dark Lord himself, and Pettigrew, who was with him. At the time Dumbledore told me this, he claimed Pettigrew was insane, and only grew more so with every passing year. But that is obviously not true."

Harry stood stock-still for a moment. Then he whispered, "Of course. He told me that once before. But I think he assumed I already knew what happened, that I knew I could have been—could have defeated Voldemort and didn't care, since I was under the influence of the phoenix web." He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. "But how can I know for certain that he's telling the truth? He could have been lying about the Soul Strength Spell. I don't know if I can trust anything that he says." He hesitated for a long moment. "And he told me that the phoenix web Dumbledore had cast on him was trying to return. That might make him even more untrustworthy."

"Do you what you can to meet with him in a setting where I may attend you," Snape suggested. "This weekend, perhaps. I am a Legilimens. I should be able to tell you for certain whether he is lying."

"And remove his phoenix web?" Harry looked up at him in hope.

Snape ground his teeth. When did 'defend Harry' turn into 'help Harry's friends?' But he knew that it would make Harry happy and ease any worry that he had about going into the meeting, so he nodded. "If it comes to that," he said.

"Thank you, thank you!" Harry abruptly darted forward and caught Snape around the waist in a spontaneous hug. He pulled back before Snape could say anything about it, and grinned at him. "I feel much better about everyone potentially being wrong about Connor, now," he announced.

Snape caught his eyes. "I hope so," he said. "I have thought for two years now that you were the true Boy-Who-Lived, Harry." He saw Harry wince, and realized his ward hadn't once used the title to refer to himself. "And I hope for the wizarding world's sake that you are. We are doomed if we have that idiot leading us."

Harry laughed softly at him, and slipped out of the room. Five minutes passed, in which Snape basked in his triumph.

Then he realized that he hadn't managed to assign Harry a punishment for leaving an illusion of himself asleep in Slytherin, and his curses shook the walls.

Harry opened his eyes quickly and let out a long, slow breath, forcing himself to relax. Everything had gone well. He'd slipped back into Slytherin and into his bed, taking the place of his illusion, before anyone had realized he was missing. And then he really had fallen asleep. He'd hate to ruin that by screaming now, just because he'd had the dream of a ring of dark figures closing in around him again.

He raised his hand to his scar, and felt it come away bloody. He sighed and sat up, looking at the blood in the faint light from the slumbering Fawkes's feathers.

He had a lot to think about concerning his dreams and his scar, if...

Harry let out another sigh and flopped back. There were still things that his new interpretation didn't explain, of course, like why Connor had a heart-shaped scar if he really hadn't played any part in Voldemort's defeat, but he thought he was close to getting definite answers, and that heartened him.

He closed his eyes, and tried to figure out what the dream meant. His scar hurt too badly to go back to sleep right away.

Death Eaters.

Harry's eyes shot open, and his heart began to beat very fast. That thought had not been his own. It had been another voice in his head, low and sorrowful and definitely male. Harry thought he ought to recognize other voices in his head by now, after having Sylarana and Tom Riddle in there.

Who are you? He carefully formed and cast the thought.

The answer came at once, somewhere from the back of his mind. Don't remember that. I never remember. But I know what you're dreaming about. Death Eaters. They're free, aren't they? The voice was wistful.

Harry shook his head slightly from side to side. He strained for a visual, the way he always had with Tom Riddle, but could see nothing, only utter darkness. At least that made it easier to concentrate on the voice. They are. But why do you think the figures in my dream are Death Eaters?

I can feel them, said the voice. I can feel anyone with a connection to Voldemort. I think I was his, once. Or him? Maybe. I don't know. But I drift around and look out through people's eyes every so often, people who have a connection with Voldemort. You. Snape. Your brother. Pettigrew.

Harry shuddered. That was beyond frightening, that someone had been watching through his eyes and sharing his memories and he hadn't known. How long have you been here?

Months.

What were you doing before that?

I can't tell you that. The voice was sad again. Memories are gone.

Harry swallowed. Are you sure you can't tell me who you are? You can't remember your name or anything else that might let me identify you?

Oh! The voice sounded delighted for the first time. There is one thing. I can't tell you, but I can show you.

Pain abruptly exploded in Harry's scar, then his hands, then his feet, then all through his body. He writhed as it ran like fire down his sides. This was worse than Crucio, worse than his dream in February of the rat and the dog.

Fawkes began trilling urgently. He felt hands shaking him, but he couldn't respond. So much pain thudded through him that he couldn't unclench his jaw. He heard distant shouts, one of his name and one of "Get Snape!"

Pain turned the world behind his eyes red, and then yellow, and then blue, slowly blooming into black.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Gone Round the Twist

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He could feel his shoulders aching first, before his head, before his scar. He thought that was odd, but he didn't try to roll them or stretch, as might have been his first action on waking otherwise. He turned his head slowly from side to side instead, and saw the dimness of the hospital wing around him. He was sprawled in a bed, and Snape was asleep in a chair beside it, looking uncomfortable. Harry wondered if the discomfort came from the position or actual worry over him, and then dropped that line of thought as too potentially uncomfortable for him in turn.

I'm sorry.

Harry managed to stifle his gasp in time, which pleased him. Let Snape sleep. What do you mean? he whispered back, wondering if thoughts that were too loud or too deliberately formed could wake an Occlumens.

I said that I would show you some key to my identity, the voice murmured. Instead, I hurt you. The pain was what I felt in the past, but that doesn't mean that I should have hurt you.

Harry reached up and touched his forehead, but still, his scar refused to ache. He wondered why, given the voice's claimed connection to Voldemort.

I don't know, the voice explained. I told you, I can't—

Remember anything about who you were, I know, Harry finished with a weary sigh.

The voice whined in his head, sounding rather like Connor when he'd just got in trouble and was in danger of being sent to bed without dinner. I'm sorry.

Apology accepted, Harry said, because otherwise he felt as though this might go on forever. But please tell me if you remember anything. Then perhaps we can move your voice back into your own rightful mind, and stop your own suffering as well as other people's.

You would do that for me? The voice sounded both wary and pleased.

Of course, Harry said. You can share my memories. You must have seen that I would want to put you back in your own body.

Oh, yes. You're compassionate that way. I'm sor—

Snape chose that moment to stir and wake up. He looked Harry directly in the eye, and his face tightened.

I can tell you what he's thinking, offered the voice smugly. Want to know what he's thinking?

Not particularly, no, Harry snapped back at it. Too late; he had the feeling that the voice had already drifted away from his mind like a cobweb. He didn't know where it had gone, probably to Snape's mind, but he hoped that it wouldn't come back and pass on the thoughts it found there.

"What happened?" Snape asked quietly. "You have been unconscious for more than a week, Harry. This is Friday night. It will be—" He swished his wand, conjured a clock in mid-air, and studied it for a moment. "Saturday morning in two hours."

Harry shook his head, even as he tested his sore muscles and found them weak enough for what Snape said to be true. "There's a voice in my head," he said. "Something that speaks about a connection to Voldemort, and being able to read the thoughts of people who have a connection to Voldemort. He said he couldn't remember who he was, so I asked him to give me a clue, and he showed me. Pain," he added, just in case Snape didn't understand what he meant.

Snape's breath hissed out of him as if Harry had punched him in the solar plexus. Then he leaned forward and clenched his hands on Harry's shoulders. "Use your Occlumency," he demanded. "Force him out."

Doesn't work that way, the voice said smugly, drifting back into his head. You can tell him that. I come through your scar, and through

his Dark Mark. Unless you can obliterate those, then I can keep talking to you. Did you know that Snape's bad habit used to be biting his toenails?

Harry tried to snicker and gag at the same time, and wound up choking. Snape shook him to get him to pay attention. Harry looked up and shook his head. "He says that it can't be done. The connection to Voldemort is my scar, or your Dark Mark, and there is no way to close those."

Snape pursed his lips around another hiss. Then he said, "We will discover a way. I will not have someone in your head who hurts you. Not again."

That was only one time! The voice was indignant now. You'd think that he'd trust you by now.

I wish you would go away and shut up, Harry thought wearily at it.

The voice gave him a sound that Harry thought was the equivalent of sticking its tongue out, and then the sense of another person in his mind left again. Harry let his head sag back on the pillow. He was not sure what he thought of all that. Perhaps the voice had been unhinged by all the pain it had gone through—or, rather, its owner had been unhinged by all the pain he had gone through. That would explain the ridiculous mixture of suffering, apologies, and childish teasing.

Yet another insane person in my head, Harry thought, as he closed his eyes. How wonderful.

"We will find a way to defeat this," Snape whispered, stroking his hair away from his forehead. "I promise you, Harry. I will not see you suffer more than you already have. What I can do to protect you from harm, I will."

Harry smiled in spite of his immediate desire to answer that he was the one who did the protecting, not Snape. He let himself slip into sleep, half-listening for echoes of the voice as he did.

It did not return.

When he woke, Draco was there, and scowling at him.

“You’re stupid,” he accused Harry.

Harry managed to raise his eyebrows. “Really?” From the light around him, he assumed it was Saturday morning, and that seemed surer from the lack of sounds in the halls and the steaming bowl of porridge that sat beside the bed—though there was really the same breakfast in the hospital wing every morning, come to think of it. Madam Pomfrey didn’t seem to trust her patients to consume anything stronger than porridge. With some help from Draco, Harry managed to sit up and maneuver the tray onto his lap. He began eating, and sighed in relief as he found that he could grip and lift the spoon. Having someone else feed him was the ultimate in humiliation as far as he was concerned.

“Yes,” said Draco, crossing his arms over his chest and staring Harry down. “Trust you to talk to someone who just strolls into your head and starts telling you that he came through your connection with the Dark Lord.” He had the sense to say the last quietly, at least, and with anxious glances at the door to make sure no one was there first. “Snape told me what happened. Honestly, Harry. Why didn’t you come and wake me up? Why did you demand clues to his identity?”

Harry blinked at him. “Because you were already asleep, and I wanted to know who it was. Wouldn’t you have done the exact same thing, Draco?”

“I would have screamed like someone was using Avada Kedavra on me, that’s what I would have done,” said Draco.

Harry shook his head and sipped the porridge again. “Yes,” he said. “We’re two very different people, Draco.”

“Yes,” Draco echoed, sitting back in his chair and giving Harry a dark look. “I’m sensible, and you’re stupid.”

Harry chuckled, which only made Draco scowl harder. “Who won the Quidditch match?” he asked, knowing it would have taken place the first Saturday that he was unconscious.

Draco’s stare this time was long and slow. “We did, Harry,” he said, as if talking to a first-year. “Honestly. It was Hufflepuff. The only one who’s worth anything on that team is Diggory, and he wasn’t flying that well. We took the Snitch after only an hour, and we’ve got the Quidditch Cup unless Gryffindor or Ravenclaw manages to pull six hundred points out of their arses on the next game.” He nodded, looking satisfied with himself.

“Well, good,” said Harry. “And classes?”

Draco shrugged. “Were the same as ever. Professor Lupin is moving us on to vampires next.” The glee in his voice made Harry suspect that would probably be Draco’s favorite lesson. “Snape is having us brew a potion you’ll have no trouble with, of course, and Longbottom made his cauldron explode.” He paused, his brow wrinkling. “And Loony—“

“Luna, Draco—“

“—came and left this for you.” Draco held up a necklace thick with swan feathers and blades of grass. “She should something about it protecting you against the Wrackspurt invasion you’re suffering.” It was obvious that Draco was trying hard to keep from snickering. Harry ignored him. Luna’s gift was heartfelt, and he always wore the necklaces for at least a short time, until the string unraveled or too many of the objects fell off and got lost. He put it around his neck now, pleased to note that his hands didn’t shake.

“I’ll have to tell her thanks,” he muttered, and then looked back at Draco. “Has Dumbledore decided what to do about my brother’s lessons yet? Or has he made any progress in finding out who put those spiders in our room?”

“No to both.” Draco could manage a snort that would make a thestral proud when he wanted to, Harry thought. “Idiot. If he would just use a

few mind-reading spells, the way you know he could, then he would probably have the answers to both questions in no time at all.”

“He’s not going to do that, Draco,” Harry said, and finished the porridge. Draco put the tray back on the table for him without prompting.

“Why not?” Draco demanded, as he fluffed Harry’s pillow without being asked, either. Harry restrained a comment about him being Madam Pomfrey in training that would probably get him punched. “He compels people all the time. Why is this different?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, but he must have his reasons for not doing it.” He closed his eyes. Sleep was close, and sounded more and more tempting the more he thought about it.

“You just forgive everyone too easily, Harry,” Draco muttered, but he sounded affectionate rather than despairing. Harry was sure he felt a soft touch to his scar just before sleep claimed him.

Harry leaned against the wall of the first floor corridor and let out a shaky breath. After he’d eaten lunch in the hospital wing and proven he could walk around the room without breaking stride, Madam Pomfrey had reluctantly agreed to let him go back to the Slytherin common room. She’d offered to escort him, or to call one of the Slytherins up to escort him, but Harry had politely refused both. He had to make it on his own, or he would have to doubt how much he had recovered.

Maybe this wasn’t a good idea after all, he thought, as the world danced around him. He closed his eyes and gave his head a good shake, in hopes that would cure it.

“Harry.”

Harry opened his eyes swiftly. He hadn’t heard that voice in weeks, at least addressing him. He straightened as much as he could and pulled his magic around him in wary defense. It answered at once. Weak though he might be in body, it was strong, and it had been

bored, Harry suspected, during the week in which he hadn't used it. Now it snarled, low and eager, in his head.

Sirius stepped out of the shadows and stood looking him over, smiling faintly.

Harry blinked. He hadn't paid that much attention to Sirius in a long time, and was astonished to see how much better he looked. The dark shadows beneath his eyes were gone, and he had a touch of color to his cheeks that hadn't been there before. His hair was trimmed from the messy shoulder-length tangle it had been. He also waited without strain for Harry to acknowledge him, where before he would have been jittery and might, Harry thought, have used compulsion.

"Sirius," he said finally. It was as much as he wanted to give, but it seemed to be enough for his godfather, who nodded and let his smile widen.

"Listen, Harry," he said. "I wanted to apologize for being a right git earlier in the year."

Harry stared at him, and lost his voice. When he found it again, it was to say, "You call trying to kill me, and attacking Snape, and pouring your brand of poison into Connor's ears, just being a right git?"

"I could use a stronger term, but I didn't know if you would want to hear language like that from your dear old godfather," said Sirius. His smile turned self-deprecating. "I fully expect you not to forgive me. You forgive almost everyone, I know, but I also know I crossed the line." He shrugged. "Just wanted you to hear the apology and decide if you wanted to accept it or not. I'll be talking to Connor, just as soon as Dumbledore lets me have contact with him—" he rolled his eyes to show that he could take and appreciated the joke "—and telling him to apologize, too. It's painful that this has gone on as long as it has." He nodded to Harry and turned, as if he would walk back up the corridor.

"Wait!" Harry called.

Sirius turned and raised his eyebrows, waiting.

"What made you decide to apologize?" Harry demanded, taking a step away from the wall. Perhaps shock was giving him strength, but this time he didn't think he would collapse. And it felt weak to be leaning on the stones, and the last thing he wanted to do was show weakness to Sirius. "This is—out of the air. A bolt of lightning." Sirius's lips twitched, and his eyes went to Harry's scar, but he didn't say anything. Harry pressed forward. "Why now, and not before?"

Sirius blinked and drew out the golden ornament that hung around his neck. Harry stared hard at it. It was round, studded with rubies and small golden chains leading back to the main one that looped around Sirius's neck. Harry could sense the song of powerful magic around it. Of course, Dumbledore had made it for Sirius, and only Dumbledore in Hogwarts had magic that powerful.

"This," said Sirius fondly, regarding the thing as he might a Christmas gift. "This finally tamed my thoughts, and gave me the help I should have asked for long since." He looked up and winked at Harry. "But your poor old godfather was too stubborn, and thought he could handle everything on his own. It's brought me back slowly. First I could control my behavior, then I could stop feeling the urges to do things like attack you or hex Snape, and then I could control my words. And now I've seen that I was always in the wrong." He shrugged when Harry's stare sharpened. "Like I said, I don't expect you to forgive me. But the option is there." He turned as if he would amble off.

"Wait!" Harry said again, and again Sirius turned around and waited patiently. Harry had to think of what question he wanted to ask. His mind was buzzing with confusion, and insistence that this reconciliation couldn't be true, that it was too easy. "How does it work?" was the only question he could ask without sounding rude.

"Order," said Sirius happily. "It traps my chaotic thoughts when they would get out of control, and brings them back into patterns that do what I tell them to. I have to think of the consequences, which is something that I almost never did before. That means that I can't

really play jokes, anymore." He pulled a wry face. "But I would much rather be sane than otherwise."

Harry nodded. He supposed something like that would work, though since he had never known just how deranged Sirius was, he had never been sure how powerful a corrective Dumbledore would need to give. "And you really want to continue being my godfather?" he asked.

Sirius blinked slowly. "That isn't something I would willingly give up, Harry," he said, a hint of reproof entering his voice for the first time. "I said I would be your godfather the day you boys were born, and I always will be. Regretfully, as long as you won't forgive me. Happily, if you do."

Harry stared again. He wanted to let himself accept this, truly he did, but he remembered how Sirius had apologized and then changed his mind before. There was just too much chance that the same thing would happen again.

"It'll have to be regretfully, for right now," he said.

Sirius nodded. "I expected no less." He shrugged. "But let me know if you ever want to talk again, Harry." He walked away this time, and Harry let him go, with dignity. He did favor his left side slightly, Harry thought, but that could be the result of a broom injury while he helped referee the latest Quidditch match. Harry had been unconscious, and hadn't asked Draco about that—not that Draco would have considered something like that worth reporting.

I'm missing an awful lot, with Sirius, Harry thought, and for the first time in months, he regretted it.

He turned and pursued his course back to the dungeons, in a more sober and thoughtful frame of mind than he had been since awakening.

"He said there was no way that we could keep him out of our heads as long as we still bore our connections to Voldemort," said Harry, eyeing the thick potion Snape was brewing. It didn't look like any he'd seen before. It was currently the color of dew, but it kept violently

changing color, and had been seventeen different ones in the last seventeen minutes. Even now, as Snape scattered powdered newt eyes into it, it burped and changed into a purple mass.

"I don't care," Snape snapped. "He must have been lying, and if he was not, there are potions that will counteract any intrusion. We have worked too long and too hard on your mind, on your Occlumency shields and your other defenses. I will not see you vulnerable that way."

Harry looked over and rolled his eyes at Draco, who stood on the other side of the room, against the wall. Draco didn't roll his eyes back. He was watching Snape as though he would memorize all the steps of this insanely complicated potion, and he had an intent frown on his face.

Harry frowned in turn, and sat back on the chair they'd provided for him when his legs began to shake, kicking at the rungs. Draco seemed to think that Snape's potion would work, and that the voice, whoever it had been, needed to be kept out of his head. Harry supposed he could see that. His pain, and then his being unconscious for a week, must have been terrifying for them.

He couldn't help but feel cautiously hopeful. He hadn't had any more pain through his scar since that initial outburst, and the voice had not returned. The reconciliation with Sirius was odd and unexpected and not something he was going to fully trust, but it had the potential to turn out well. This was the first day he had been awake, and he could still move around with short rests, and he seemed to have no permanent side effects from the pain. He also had less homework to make up than he might have, since he was far enough ahead in most of his classes to know the material for the third year by heart. He could rest until Monday, if he wanted to.

If he had seen Connor, or had some assurance that his brother had visited him while he was in the hospital wing, then his life would have been as close to content as it ever came.

Harry closed his eyes and tried, again, to work out what the best solution to that problem would be. Perhaps he should simply tell Connor that Sirius had approached him and offered to reconcile? That might shock his brother into dropping the act, and telling Harry why he had been so intent on trying to protect Sirius. Harry had no doubt but that his godfather was the heart of the matter. Lily might have been, originally, but Lily was outside the school, and Connor seemed to have accepted that her magic was not coming back no matter what Harry might do or say. Sirius was nearby, and vulnerable to a powerful wizard like Harry, should Harry decide that he wanted to hurt him.

What would make him certain beyond a doubt that I was going to hurt Sirius, when we haven't even talked to each other in months? And he did seem certain. What would make him think—

Harry's eyes flared open, and his breathing quickened. The prophecy. The prophecy he heard. Fuck, that must be it. I have to find Connor and tell him about Sirius trying to reconcile, then. Maybe that will persuade him to tell me what the prophecy said, and we can try to avoid it together. Or figure it out. It wouldn't surprise me to know that he's interpreted it wrongly.

Harry tried to hop up from the chair in his restlessness, and found he couldn't; his legs had gone to sleep. As he shook them and tried to get the tingles out, Draco strolled across the room to him, just incidentally getting between Harry and the door.

"And where do you think you're going?" he all but chirped.

"To see Connor," said Harry, impatiently wishing that his left foot was not waking up with such sharp pins and needles. "I just figured something out about why he didn't want me to hurt Sirius. It's important."

"You aren't," Draco corrected, his voice still chirpy. "You aren't going anywhere alone, and you aren't going anywhere near your brother until you're fully recovered."

"That's true," said Snape, without looking away from his potion. It was now the color of new grass, Harry saw, and smelled like nasty cheese. The color changed again as Snape added crushed rose petals, and at least the smell was more pleasant now.

"You don't understand," Harry insisted. "Connor heard a prophecy in February. I think the prophecy said—or he imagined it said—something about me hurting Sirius. That's why he's been resisting me so hard. I have to go and explain to him that I don't intend to hurt Sirius, but I need to know the prophecy, so that we can work on it together."

"You are not going near anyone but other Slytherins this weekend." Draco's eyes were flinty. He held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth to object. "No, Harry. You could have fucking died. Yes, again, I know, but that doesn't make it any less important. You had a fucking voice in your head, and you can't be trusted not to risk your health on the whim of the moment. You are staying right here until Professor Snape finishes his potion and tests it."

"But why?" Harry demanded. He knew it was a stupid question, knew Draco must have been more worried than he let on all along, but this was so important, more important than silly House prejudices or their odd idea that his twin might hurt him. Harry could pin Connor to the wall again if he had to.

Draco's face flushed, and he leaned nearer Harry. "Because I refuse to let you die," he said. "Sit. Down."

Harry sighed and sagged back into the chair. He couldn't outrun Mrs. Norris at the moment, and he supposed that taking Draco with him when he talked to Connor wouldn't make much of a difference—

Wait. Yes, it would. All right, I'll put Draco under a Silencio before we start the actual conversation.

Harry relaxed. Draco eyed him suspiciously, and then turned and looked at Snape. "Is the potion almost done, sir? I think that we should feed it to Harry before he comes up with some other insane plan."

"Almost," said Snape, and the potion turned clear again. Snape studied it with his head on one side, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the edge of the cauldron. Harry burned to say something about that, since it was one of the things that made Snape take House points from Gryffindor in class, but he kept silent. This was not the kind of atmosphere into which he wanted to throw that remark.

Into that silence came the flutter of wings. Harry looked up in surprise as an owl flew through the slightly open door of Snape's office—the potion had had to send its fumes somewhere—and over to him. It was a barn owl, one of the ordinary school birds, and it took off again the moment Harry removed the parchment from its leg. Harry supposed it had already been fed or paid.

He unfolded the parchment, and frowned. It was blank, without the slightest trace of a note to make this worth whoever had paid the owl. Was it a joke, perhaps? Something like the Marauder's Map, where he had to speak a specific phrase to get it to work?

It would be just like the twins to send me a blank piece of paper that explodes in my face, he thought then, and cautiously held it away from him.

Words began appearing on it in the next moment, in a flowing, looping hand that he didn't recognize.

Hello, Potter.

Now comes the night, and out of this darkness, there will be no morn.

Harry stared. This had to be a joke, and perhaps he was supposed to recognize the last words as some quote from a song or a poem, but he didn't. Who would be writing to him like this?

"Who are you?" he asked aloud, and then realized that was stupid. If this parchment functioned like the ones he and Connor had used, then he had to write back, not speak.

Snape looked up sharply. He didn't appear to have noticed the owl's arrival. "Is the voice in your head again?" he asked.

Yes, said a smug tone from the back of Harry's mind.

Harry shook his head, because he couldn't have Snape bothering about that right now. "Someone's writing to me through a piece of parchment," he said. "Do you have a quill?"

Draco raced to retrieve him one, and stood behind him, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder, as Harry braced the letter on the table to write back. Who are you? Do I know you?

The answer appeared almost at once. Harry could hear the laughter. Oh, yes. In the past few months, you have come to know me very well.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Who are you? He underlined the middle word for emphasis.

Come, Harry, you are not able to figure it out? Oh, I am so disappointed in you. Of course, I suppose that you could have been a bit too trusting. Trusting Slytherins and Headmasters and former Death Eaters...and rats.

Harry's breath rushed out of him. "Peter?"

Very good, the answer appeared at once. Oh, yes, I have eyes on you, Harry, though I am not there with you. We're going to play a little game now, since everything is ready at last. See if you can figure out the moves before I make them. Or just after I make them, which is the more usual course. Let's have some fun.

In the next instant, Snape screamed.

Harry's head jerked up, and he saw his guardian sagging to the dungeon floor, his right hand tearing at his left arm. Draco shouted and bowled over to him, helping him tear. In moments, the sleeve was pulled back, and Harry could see the ugly flare of the Dark Mark.

Just seeing it made his scar burn, and he closed his eyes and fought back pain and nausea and the thick bile of betrayal.

"What do you want?" Harry shouted, easing himself off the chair. Snape's screams were inhuman. Harry reached out towards him with magic, but found nothing that he could affect. The pain was coming from inside Snape, through the connection that he had forged long ago and of his own free will with Voldemort. Harry could practically see the conduit, coiled like a shimmering serpent atop the dark one, but he couldn't touch it.

He glanced back at the parchment even as the reply to his question formed.

To play. You have cost my Lord enough time in the past. A swift death is out of the question. To make you suffer, to make those whom you love suffer...yes, I think that will do well enough.

How is your brother, Harry?

Harry swore under his breath and reached for his pocket. Of course, this was the one day that he hadn't brought any of his maps with him, and he couldn't see where Connor or Peter was in Hogwarts. And Snape's screams were driving nails through his head, pushing him closer and closer to the edge over which panic would bear him.

He had to do something about that.

Harry focused all his will on Snape, and whispered, "Consopio."

The screams stopped as Snape fell asleep. He would have fallen, too, but Draco caught and gently laid him down. Harry stood amid the sounds of his own panting for a moment, then turned back towards the parchment.

That was clever, scrawled the mocking message. Very clever. You can send someone to sleep when he suffers pain, yes. But it won't be as easy next time.

I will give you the answers that you've wanted, Harry Potter. But first, I think you should go to the second floor. There's a locked door there that I want you to open, one that leads to an office you haven't entered all year.

Harry closed his eyes. He knew what the message must be talking about. The door to Sirius's office.

He snatched up the parchment and walked towards the door. Draco joined him without comment, and caught Harry when he wobbled. His eyes dared Harry to say anything about that, anything at all, to send him away or tell him to stop. But Harry just nodded to him.

"We've got a game to play," he said, and then turned and cast a ward over Snape's office as they left it, to hold Snape safe against any harm that might come to him. He barely thought about it as he created it, though he did make sure to close any small holes a rat might have crawled through. His shock and pain had given way to something else, something that was familiar and crawling out of the darkest parts of him.

As he hurried towards the second floor, Draco supporting him where necessary, ice raced along the walls beside him and behind him and ahead.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: A Blow-Up Between Brothers

Harry waited for a moment while what appeared to be most of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team went by, chattering about how they would beat Gryffindor in their match in a few weeks. He leaned partially against the wall and partially against Draco, though he drew away from the latter the moment the team was by. Draco gave him a sharp look.

"I don't want to look as though I'm about to fall over," Harry explained, before turning and concentrating on the door to Sirius's office.

"But you are."

Harry ignored that. He certainly was not, and if he'd felt a brief moment of surging dizziness and nausea, that didn't matter, did it? Peter was certainly not about to wait for him to catch his breath.

He glanced at the parchment, which had sprouted new letters. I can watch you, you know, Harry. And that was not an impressive display. How are you ever going to face my spells, when I finally tell you where I am?

"Bastard," Harry muttered.

That insult long ago lost the power to sting me, I assure you. Harry had never seen Peter's face twisted into an evil smirk, but he found it surprisingly easy to imagine. Now, open the door. I want you to understand the full history of my brilliant plan, and you can't, not unless you see what lies in Sirius's office.

Harry tried a simple Alohomora first, and wasn't surprised when it didn't work. No professor would leave his or her door bound with magic that all the students could counter. He considered a spell like Reducto, but that would draw attention, and he desperately didn't want anyone else involved in this little game. He knew that Peter would not hesitate to hurt anyone else.

That's going to be a problem, in a short time, Harry thought, glancing sideways at Draco.

"I don't suppose you have the counterspells?" he snarled at the parchment.

Why, Harry, I thought you would never ask, the parchment replied at once. The password is Freedom of the mind. The last word was scrawled with a distinctive flourish.

Harry paused for a moment, wondering what that password said about Sirius, and then leaned close to the door and whispered it.

The door softly came open under his hands. Harry pushed it inwards and stepped into Sirius's office, remembering what it had looked like the last time he had been here. Peter wasn't quite right in saying that he hadn't been in Sirius's office all school year, since he and Snape had chased Remus here when he wanted to bite Sirius, but that had been only a few days after the New Year, and perhaps the voice was being very literal.

Then, the office had been neat and cozy and warm, with a Gryffindor Quidditch banner hung on every wall.

Now, it was dim, the only light a dying fire, and it looked like a cross between a battlefield and a half-destroyed treasure vault.

Harry stared at the cages stirring with spiders of the kind that had attacked him in the Slytherin bedroom. Another one caught his eye, and he saw the swimming motion of the same kind of snake that had attacked Draco. He closed his eyes.

"No," he whispered. "I don't understand. How?"

Draco caught him from behind and leaned him against the table, on which rested other artifacts, weapons of some kind, radiating powerful magic. Harry opened his eyes to read the parchment's answer.

Oh, Harry, I am watching you, and the expression on your face is everything I hoped for. But you should have guessed before this, Harry. Who but a powerful Dark wizarding family would have access

to the kind of artifacts that came after you, the kind of artifact used to watch Lucius Malfoy and determine his true intentions from his blood? And, of course, Sirius is still heir to that family, even though he should not have been. Dumbledore saw to that. He could not bear that the Second War might come and they wouldn't have access to the kind of weapons that the Blacks possessed.

Harry felt a gust of anger grip him, and rattled the parchment. "How do I know you're Peter? Why shouldn't you be Sirius?"

Because you would know Sirius's handwriting, wouldn't you? came the swift answer. And this is not Sirius's handwriting.

Harry controlled his anger as best he could. Currently, his magic was gripping the edges of the parchment, suggesting it could rip it, and he didn't dare do that. "So why isn't Sirius helping you anymore, then?"

He grew too sane for us to use anymore, the parchment reported. By now, it had covered both sides, and Harry wondered what would happen next. What happened was its flipping itself over, the lines it had already written vanishing, and the new message beginning at the top of the front again. When he was still insane, struggling under the influence of the curse that the Dark Lord used to bind his mind to his brother's, then he was very useful. A trusted member of the Order of the Phoenix, who would occasionally break and give us information when the pain became too much for him, and who didn't dare tell anyone else what he was suffering because of his stupid pride, who thought he had to fight alone? Oh, yes, very useful. The writing paused for a moment. Harry tried to force away the image of Peter waiting with a quill in his hand and a manic grin on his face. Tell me, Harry, who do you think it was that dropped the anti-Apparition wards in your first year and gave the Lestranges access to the Quidditch Pitch?

Harry lost his breath yet again, and closed his eyes. He heard Draco make an unexpectedly deep and dangerous sound of outrage. Harry couldn't confront him about it, though. His mind was on the first Quidditch game he had ever played opposite Connor. Their parents, Sirius, and Remus had come. Sirius's face had been haggard, his eyes drowning above the dark circles of nightmares.

For at least two years, then, Sirius had been struggling madly against that curse, his sanity wavering whenever he tried, bouncing back and forth between the madness that had led him to attack Snape this autumn and turn against Harry in second year, and the calmness that made him the godfather who had gifted Harry with the armband that would enhance a Parselmouth's magic. And he had said nothing. The parchment called it "stupid pride," but now that Harry knew about Peter, he could well imagine what else Sirius had been thinking. Someone had already been sacrificed for him. Sirius hadn't been indifferent after all. Guilt had probably been eating him alive, and when he found out that the sacrifice wasn't enough to free him from Voldemort's curse, he would have determined to fight the rest of the battle alone.

Oh, Sirius, you and your stupid hero complex, Harry thought, and opened his eyes to read on.

Dumbledore's ornament made him too sane, the parchment wrote, Peter wrote, the words rippling with what Harry imagined was probably disgust. So we did, after all, have to replace him with a more satisfactory servant. And now I am here, and the attempt to resurrect the Dark Lord is not going to fail after all.

Harry shook his head slowly. "I thought you went to Azkaban for love of your friends, Peter, not for love of Voldemort."

Draco leaned heavily on his shoulder, supporting him or being supported, as the answer appeared. I lied. And now he is almost returned, Harry. A few more steps remain, a few more movements on the game board. First, of course, you might want to ask yourself where Sirius is right now.

Harry stiffened, and felt his lungs refuse to work. Draco pounded him on the back until they did again. Harry winced, and whooped out the breath, and snapped aloud, "Walking around the castle, I would assume."

Wrong. The ritual to bring back the Dark Lord requires certain...sacrifices. And who better to be one of them than a man for

whom so much has already been sacrificed, and who is fated to die anyway, if one believes the second prophecy?

"How do you know about that?" Harry demanded. He felt horribly helpless, writhing between the urge to rush out and find Sirius right now, and the temptation to keep reading on, so that he wouldn't cause Sirius immediate death or debilitating injury.

I know pain, Peter said. And Sirius has never been good at resisting it. He bore that curse in his head for twelve years, Harry, did you know that? It never broke, though he told everyone else it did, in the hopes of easing his own conscience over my supposed sacrifice.. He relived Regulus's torture each and every time he slept, and the curse whispered and urged him to act in my lord's voice. Sometimes he broke. Often he didn't.

Harry shivered. He thought he knew now why he had dreamed so often of two dark figures in torment, and why those dreams had ceased after his nightmare of the rat and the dog. That had been around the time that Dumbledore's ornament had finally taken hold of Sirius and cured him, to hear the Headmaster tell it. The snapping teeth of the small creature had been the ornament and not Peter after all, Harry thought. His mind had been free at last, with no more reliving of pain...

And now his body was not.

The point is, the writing continued, when he could finally direct his eyes back to it, I think you should know the second prophecy before you come and visit with me and Sirius. And I'm not going to write it down for you. That would be too easy. Find a way to learn it, Harry, and then come to me. And be assured, I shall know if you do not. I have eyes upon you.

Harry pulled himself sharply out of the tumbling disgust and rage that wanted to seize him. He clenched his hands in front of him. "How do you want me to find out the second prophecy without alerting everyone to what you're doing?" he demanded.

You're an intelligent boy. I'm sure you'll figure out a way.

Harry nodded, once. "Draco," he said, "do you know where Connor is right now?"

Draco's eyes were almost black. Harry blinked so hard at that that he nearly missed Draco's words. "If you think I'm going to let you confront your brother in this state, you're mad."

"Draco," Harry whispered, "we have to."

Draco shook his head. "The proper thing to do is turn this over to McGonagall right away, if you trust her," he said.

That wouldn't be smart, the parchment pointed out helpfully. I can hear every word you see, mark every expression on your faces.

Harry bowed his head. He couldn't risk it, not when Peter apparently had Sirius and was going to hurt him. If he understood Peter's temperament right, he was interested in this game right now, and would play until Harry managed to find him. But let someone else step in, and everything was about to go badly wrong. Peter hadn't vetoed the suggestion of Connor, so Harry guessed that he didn't mind if his brother knew.

"I'm going with you, at least," Draco said.

Harry gave the parchment a wary glance, but received only the message Such loyal friends you have, Harry. Even now, Sirius is struggling against me, as though he could get out from under the control I have over him. Stubborn son of a bitch. Once again, Harry thought he could hear the laughter.

Harry nodded. "That's fine for now. Come on." He turned and limped three steps to the door of Sirius's office.

"Wait!"

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Draco was picking up a spider from the table, and Harry winced. "It's going to bite you," he whispered.

"It is not." Draco shook the spider back and forth, and showed its unmoving legs. "I don't think anyone but their master can really control them, Harry. And since Sirius Black isn't in a position to control them right now, they aren't going to respond. But I do want us to have proof of what happened, in case someone is inclined to question this ridiculous story. I would be." He slid the spider into his pocket.

Harry paused abruptly, a spasm of doubt going through him. If only their master can control the spiders, then why did several of them attack me after Sirius supposedly gained his sanity?

And then there had been the sharp crack of a house elf's Apparition in the hallway that day...

Harry restrained himself from glancing wildly around the room, though he thought he knew how they were being watched now. The Blacks would have had access to a house elf along with all these malicious Dark treasures, though, and a Black house elf could have come and gone freely from Hogwarts in a way that a Hogwarts house elf could not have. He had a slight, fragile advantage, or two if one counted his perception of the flaw in Peter's story—whatever it meant. It was still true that he did not recognize the handwriting on the parchment, and he would have known Sirius's.

"If you must, Draco," he said aloud. "Come on. Let's go find Connor."

Good idea, the parchment said.

Harry smoothed his face into desperation for the sake of the house elf's eyes, not that it was hard, and led the way out the door.

Harry swore and banged his trunk shut. Draco glanced up, startled, from where he was studying the spider critically. He'd placed it on his bed and cast several spells at it, none of which raised a response.

"What's the matter?"

"My maps of the school and the grounds are gone," Harry muttered in disgust. "I can't use them to tell where Connor is."

He noticed the parchment trembling in the way that meant new letters were appearing on it, and snatched it up, glaring balefully at it.

I could have told you that, if you asked, Peter was writing. Did you think I would have left you with a weapon that would let you know where we are before I am ready? Easy enough for a rat to steal in and remove them.

"Great, but now I have no idea where my brother is," Harry snapped aloud. Blaise, Vince, and Greg were out in the sunshine, which was the only reason he dared speak like this.

Find him, the parchment suggested, without much compassion.

Harry drew breath to reply, but someone banged on the bedroom door just then. Draco tossed a fold of his sheets over the spider, and moved over to open it, giving Harry a look that Harry correctly interpreted as Stay still and behind me.

Harry didn't think he had the strength to argue. His head and gut were both blazing and slowly spinning with tension and exhaustion. He did call up his magic, but let it drop again when he saw it was only Marcus Flint at the door, his face wrinkled into an expression of disgust.

"Your brother's at the door of the common room, Potter," he said.
"Something about your godfather."

Harry nodded back, grateful for the information, and stepped forward. Draco was beside him in an instant, one hand resting on his shoulder for support and to control how fast he went. Harry gritted his teeth and told himself that he was grateful, really he was, to have such a good friend. That he wanted to kill Draco right now was more a reflection of his own tense mood than anything else, he thought.

But he still can't come with me to wherever Peter and Sirius are.

He and Draco were going to have to talk about that, probably in a few minutes, or possibly a few hours, whenever Peter made up his mind

to end the game. Harry suspected it was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

They came to the door of the common room, and Harry knew from Connor's desperate, tearful eyes that his brother already suspected something was wrong.

"Where is he?" Connor demanded, one hand in his pocket. Harry suspected he held his wand, though he hadn't drawn it yet. "I've looked for him everywhere, Harry. What happened?"

"I need to know the second prophecy, Connor," said Harry, checking to make sure that the common room door had slid shut behind them and that no one was coming down the corridor. "I know you know it, and I know it has something to do with Sirius, and I know that—"

"And you kidnapped Sirius so that I would tell it to you?" Connor backed away from him, eyes so wide that he seemed to be drowning his face in hazel. "Are you insane?"

"No, no, not that!" said Harry, and reached for the parchment—only to realize he'd left it on his bed. He cursed and glanced at Draco. "Draco, will you go and get the parchment, please?"

"And leave you alone here?" Draco's voice sounded like Narcissa's now, and he hand his wand out, though not quite pointed fully at Connor. "No, Harry. Never. Since you have no self-preservation instinct, I'm just going to have to be that instinct for both of us. And I'm not leaving you with your brother."

Harry counted to ten in his head, in Mermish. "We do not have time," he said. "Please, Draco, we have to—"

"Come to that, Harry," said Draco, in a cheerful voice that didn't at all give Harry warning of what he said next, "your godfather can go fuck himself, and your brother can go fuck himself, and everyone else who needs you to rescue them and think for them can go fuck themselves. I'm protecting you. Your life matters more to me than any of theirs."

"But it's not that way to me," said Harry.

"I know," said Draco. "That means that I'm just taking on a role that you would have yourself, if you'd been raised by someone sane."

"Don't talk about our mother that way!" Connor yelled, and this time he did pull his wand.

"We really don't have time for that," Harry muttered. "Connor, please. I didn't take Sirius, but he is in danger, and I believe that he's probably going to lose his life unless I know the second prophecy. It's important. Please? I have to know it, and I know that you know it."

Connor shook his head, his face turned pale again. "It says that you're g-going to kill him," he stammered. "But prophecies can be shifted, if you try hard enough. They can shift. If I can make it mean something else, if it does mean something else, then Sirius isn't going to die." His eyes fixed on Harry's face with a resolve that Harry found familiar. It came from their last lesson together, when Connor had started fighting back against him with wandless magic. And he was close to the edge of panic now, his magic plunging around him like a wild horse. "I'm certainly not going to tell you how the prophecy says you're going to kill him," he whispered.

"The exact wording matters," Harry said. "And I need that prophecy, Connor. Please. Give it to me."

"You could rip it out of his mind with Legilimency," Draco whispered into his ear. "Damn it, Harry, do it."

"That won't make me any better than he is," Harry snarled back, and hated the moment of temptation that he felt. He tried to smile soothingly at his brother, though he suspected it was impossible under the circumstances and it came out as a twisted grimace instead. "Please. I'll swear by whatever you like, by Merlin or magic or by an Unbreakable Vow, that I'm not going to kill Sirius."

"The prophecy says that you are," Connor whispered. "And if I told you, then I would be making it come true. There's so little room to turn it aside, now. We're getting into the last moments."

"Does it say something about May?" Harry kept his own voice a whisper, too, wondering if he could lure the prophecy out of Connor by playing into his own half-conscious rambling. It seemed to work. Connor's eyes turned to him, but they weren't piercing and panicked. They were dreamy, as though Harry were a figure he was seeing in his own mind.

"Yes," Connor breathed. "Do you swear that you haven't kidnapped him, Harry? Do you swear that you haven't hurt him?"

Harry nodded. "I promise you. In the name of Merlin."

Connor nodded back. "Then I think I know where he is," he said, voice just barely above a mutter. "The last safe place, he told me it was." He blinked, and the mask of sleep or unconsciousness was gone from his eyes, replaced with the same grim determination Harry had been trying to inspire for the cause of Connor becoming a leader. "And I won't let you hurt him."

"I said that I wasn't—"

Connor narrowed his eyes, and Harry recognized the surge of magic, the cool wind in his thoughts, that meant he was about to start using compulsion. With an effort, he kept his voice even. "That doesn't work on me, Connor, remember?"

"There are other kinds than the kind I used on you, Harry," said Connor, voice detached. "Reinforcing someone's deepest desires is the simplest one. And right now, I have the perfect candidate for that."

Harry knew what would happen then, but knowing what would happen wasn't the same thing as being able to prevent it. Connor's gaze moved past him and fixed on Draco, and the next moment Draco grabbed Harry's arms and held them firmly together behind his back.

"I'm not letting you go into danger," he murmured fiercely into Harry's ear.

Connor nodded to Harry. "He really wants to protect you," he said. "Just the way that I really want to protect Sirius. I'll get him off Hogwarts grounds, help him flee to a place where he'll be safe from you and the prophecy will have to mean something else, and then come back and face the consequences of this. Whatever they are." He gave a fleeting, fragile grin, and then turned and ran up the dungeon corridor as if there were Grims after him.

That left Harry with a struggling Draco, who wanted to protect him by any means necessary. Harry tried to throw off the physical grip, but the attack of pain more than a week ago, and then the week in bed, had left him desperately weak. It was easy for Draco to pin him against the wall.

"I'm not letting you go into danger," Draco repeated, looking more stubborn than ever, his eyes still dark. "I'm going to put you to sleep, and then we're going to wait for Snape to wake up. He'll be able to talk sense into you. You know that he wouldn't want you going into danger, either, wouldn't want you risking your life for that mutt of a godfather."

Harry knew he had to do something about Draco before that happened. The moment Snape was awake and through the ward that Harry had put around him, then he could give up any thought of going after Sirius. Draco was right; Snape wouldn't think Sirius's life worth the potential loss of Harry's.

Harry began to call on his magic, rationing it carefully. If he simply attacked, without finesse but with a great pulse of power, then he would hurt Draco. This had to be done with the fine control he had worked on with Snape.

"Consopio."

Harry felt the sleep spell coming at him, and knew he could bounce it—but that would mean being prepared for an attack in the next instant. He took a deep breath and unleashed a bit, just a tiny bit, of his ability to eat magic.

It came to life around him, hissing like a hungry snake, and devoured Draco's spell. Harry let his body sag as if it had hit him, though, and Draco scooped him up, cradling him in his arms. He murmured the password, and carried Harry through the common room and towards their bedroom the moment the door opened. Harry waited, tense as he could be when he was letting his muscles lap over Draco's arms like pudding, but Draco didn't call on anyone to help. He appeared to believe that protecting Harry meant protecting Harry by himself.

Accordingly, once they were in the bedroom, Harry gathered his magic up and used it to pour strength into his limbs, the way he had when he was holding Fenrir Greyback back from biting him. He rolled out of Draco's grip and managed to stand, wobbling, beside his bed. The parchment was there, but when Harry shot a glance at it, he didn't see any new writing on it. He supposed Peter, or whoever was really managing to control the Black spiders and the Blacks' house elf, was content merely to watch and see how this would play out.

Draco smiled at him, a smile full of appreciation. "I should have known that such a simple spell wouldn't take you down," he murmured. "There's still the chance to be sane about this, Harry. You can give me your word that you won't try to escape, and we can go and wake Snape up together. You know that he can help you figure out some plan to keep you safe and perhaps even rescue your godfather."

Harry coughed. His stomach, for a moment, felt as though it were about to empty itself out his throat whether or not he wanted it to, but he held it down. The next moment, he heard the voice murmur in the back of his head. You're not going to be sick. It's not that kind of pain.

Harry felt the voice settle, watchful, in his thoughts. He ignored it for the moment, though. He didn't know how much help it would be, and perhaps it was even content to stay neutral. It certainly hadn't done anything for him so far.

I am trying to. The voice sounded injured.

Draco was already aiming his wand again. "Petrificus Totalus," he said clearly, and the spell's light came for Harry.

The snake wound around his shoulders ate it without being asked, and the magic around Harry began to purr. Harry felt a bit stronger. He pushed away the temptation to eat more. This was still Dark magic, and he was using it at all only because he couldn't risk Draco disabling him. He had to think of something soon, something that would not hurt Draco but would convince him to stay here.

He laughed, in the next instant. He really should have thought of this before. Draco wasn't doing this of his own free will. Harry could return his free will to him.

He locked up the magic-eating ability again, caught Draco's eyes, and whispered, "Legilimens."

He was past the barriers in a moment; Harry wondered if that was because of the strength of his magic, called and dancing around him, or because Draco had little true interest in keeping Harry out of his thoughts. Then he had no time to wonder, swept away by what was before him.

Draco's mind was a house, created in the same silver-gray shade that most of Malfoy Manor was, shading from deep at the bottom to pale at the top, like a rising wave. Harry stood in a wide entrance hall with a spiral staircase in front of him, each tread a different color. Corridors led in different directions, locked doors standing firmly in them, and winds blew past Harry's head, carrying delicate glass bubbles that swirled with more colors still.

Across one of the corridors ran a thick rope, obstructing passage down it and bouncing back the bubbles when they tried to drift over it. Harry strode towards it and laid his hand on it, certain he could unbind Connor's compulsion in a moment and return Draco's mind to where it needed to be.

The rope buzzed and hummed and sang when Harry touched it, and affection poured through him like a tidal wave.

Harry snatched his hand back and stared at the rope. It was an intruder in Draco's mind. It shouldn't work so well as a conduit for his emotions.

Perhaps he had done something wrong. He touched the rope at a different place this time, and made sure to concentrate on his image of Draco free, so that he wouldn't feed the compulsion.

Once more, the affection pounced on him and rolled over him, inundating Harry with ripples of protectiveness and possessiveness and friendship.

Harry stumbled, but managed to retain his grip on the rope, and remembered Connor's words in the same instant.

"Reinforcing someone's deepest desires is the simplest one. And right now, I have the perfect candidate for that."

Draco really did want to protect him. Draco really did feel this affection for him. The emotions weren't unnatural, but what Draco really felt when it came to Harry.

Stunned, disbelieving, struggling hard to avoid confronting what that would mean, Harry stepped away from the rope. He couldn't unbind the compulsion because he didn't have time. As Connor had said, it was wound into the deeper structures of Draco's mind, already making itself a natural part of his thinking, and it would take very fine work to separate it out again.

Harry did a simpler thing, reaching out to the light that surrounded him in Draco's mind and asking it to dim. It did, thrusting Draco into unconsciousness and Harry out of his thoughts.

He opened his eyes and found himself crouching on the floor between their beds, with the voice in the back of his head murmuring some vague appreciation. He forced himself to his feet with a grip on the bedclothes, and stumbled around Draco's bed to look.

Draco lay on the floor, his wand sprawled by his outflung hand, his face peaceful. Harry couldn't help lingering for a moment, staring, before he shook his head and whispered, "Sorry, Draco."

Draco wouldn't be able to come with him. Harry had known it. He did regret leaving him this way.

He made it back to his bed by sheer force of will, and pumping more and more of his own magic into his limbs so that he could stand straight. He picked up the parchment, and saw more words appearing.

You've done the right thing, Harry. I would hate to have someone else interfere in our little game. Now, of course, you have to figure out some other way to learn the second prophecy, as your brother will certainly not tell you, and Sirius isn't in a position to tell anyone anything at the moment. Harry wished he couldn't so clearly imagine the vicious chuckle that would follow those words.

Oddly, he felt stronger than he had a short time before. How much of it had to do with the emotions he'd encountered in Draco's mind, he didn't know, but he would take what he could get.

And, right now, he had a plan to learn the second prophecy.

In fact, he thought, one hand reaching for the spider Draco had left on his bed and one for the parchment, if I'm thinking right, I already did.

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Help From Hermione

Harry had reached the Gryffindor portrait hole before he realized he had no idea what the password was; Connor hadn't seen fit to give it to him lately, and Harry didn't associate regularly enough with any of the other Gryffindors.

He paced and swore for a moment, then spun and looked up at the Fat Lady, who was staring back at him in interest. "Can you appear on the other side of your portrait?" he asked.

"Yes, dear," she said, giving him an odd look. "Are you all right? You're sweating, and pale, and frankly you look as if you should be in bed."

Harry nodded distractedly. He didn't have time for people parenting him, no matter how few people seemed to believe this. "Could you reappear on the other side of your portrait and call for Hermione Granger, please? It's vitally important that I speak with her."

"Of course, dear," said the Fat Lady, and gave him one more sympathetic look before she vanished. Harry waited, though he did force himself to stop pacing and lean against the wall. He didn't want to exhaust all his strength. He still had to persuade Hermione to go through with this plan, and that was likely to take some doing.

The parchment in his hands rattled. Harry warily lowered his gaze. The writing had a slant to it it hadn't had before. With a leap of his heart, Harry recognized Sirius's handwriting.

Harry, you must listen to me. I can't stop—

The writing jerked to a stop, a flying spot of ink appearing beside it, as though someone had roughly snatched the quill from Sirius's fingers. Harry waited, barely breathing, until the mocking hand appeared again. Sorry about that. He continues to fight, even though he knows it's hopeless. Really, is this a trait of all Gryffindors?

Harry narrowed his eyes, and added that hole in the story to the hole in the story about Sirus's spiders attacking after he supposedly

regained his sanity. Peter would know exactly what Gryffindors were like, having been one himself.

The portrait swung outward just then, and Hermione poked her head out. Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Harry? Why aren't you on a bed in the hospital wing? I don't think you should be up yet!" Her voice was shrill, and rising further in her concern.

Harry wondered, irritably, why that was the first thing anyone thought of. He probably looked awful, but why would he have left the hospital wing and tottered up to Gryffindor Tower if this wasn't urgent?

"Hermione," he said softly, "I need your help." He motioned her out of the portrait hole, and then far enough away from the listening Fat Lady so that she couldn't overhear. Hermione followed despite the frown on her face, the gleam in her eyes saying that her curiosity had been roused. Harry had been counting on that.

He faced her, and tried to sound as normal as possible as he said, "I need to use your Time Turner to go back in time and listen to a prophecy."

Her face changed slowly, the scowl growing even more thunderous, her lips pursing. Harry winced in spite of himself. She looked sterner than McGonagall when the professor was angry, and that was saying something. But he held himself firm. There really was no option other than this. If this failed, then he knew of no way that he could learn Trelawney's prophecy, short of tracking Connor or Ron down and ripping the words from their minds. Trelawney would have forgotten the prophecy the moment she made it; all true Seers did.

"You need to what." The last word cracked like a house elf Apparating. Harry winced, and glanced at the parchment in his hands, but no new words had appeared. Apparently, the mysterious man, Peter or whoever he was, was willing to wait and listen to what happened.

"I need to use your Time Turner and go back in time to that day in Divination when Connor made you mad," he said. Still he kept his voice calm, though he could feel the panic boiling and straining at its leash. "Please, Hermione. This is the only way that I can learn it, and

I need to know it. I think Connor's run off somewhere because he's so convinced that the prophecy said something about me killing Sirius. But I don't know that for certain."

Hermione nodded slowly. "All right. But, Harry, I've only ever gone back as far as three hours. This will be going back...months."

"I know," said Harry simply. "I trust you to make the calculations." They were both in Arithmancy, but Hermione was better at maths, no surprise there.

Hermione gave him a suspicious, sidelong glance. "You're not going to go off on your own and try to use the Time Turner the moment you have the calculations, then?"

Harry frowned. "Of course not. I don't know how to use it, and I wouldn't trust myself to be careful right now even if I did." He glanced at the gleaming chain just barely visible around Hermione's neck. "I trust that the chain is long enough to loop around both of us, and can take both of us back? I think that you need to hear the prophecy, too. You deserve it." If only so that she can understand how dangerous this is, and she won't argue with me when I have to leave her out of the final confrontation.

Hermione studied him once, then nodded. "We go back one hour for every inversion of the glass," she said. "Twenty-four hours in a day, more than three months..." She turned away from Harry, muttering, and waved her wand in front of her. A bit of parchment flicked out of her robes, and a quill joined it, making rapid scratches as she calculated.

Harry blinked and stared for a moment before he shut his mouth. He sometimes forgot how powerful Hermione was, until he saw her in action. She didn't have a specific gift like Connor's compulsion or his Parseltongue; she eschewed flashy magic. But she could cast many small useful spells that all worked together much faster and more smoothly than any ordinary wizard could have achieved, and she could maintain them effortlessly while she began another spell. As Harry watched, beyond the levitation charms on both parchment and quill, and the enchantment that made the quill write, she levitated a

small calendar from her robe pocket to check for sure and certain on the dates of the months, all the while with numbers rushing through her head.

Harry shook his head—he winced as that motion made him dizzy—and waited. The parchment in his hands rippled briefly. Harry looked down.

She is a clever witch. And I stand ready to help you, of course, if you need anything.

Harry swallowed. It truly, truly disturbed him how clearly he could imagine the laughter every time the letter-writer wrote something like that. But he did nod and mutter, while watching Hermione to make sure she had her back to him, “Yes. I need you to command Sirius to command the spider.” He patted the spider that hung in his robe pocket. “I’m going to need it to attack someone.”

Done.

Harry ground his teeth, though he tried to keep his expression as blank as possible, given the watching house elf. The writer was pleased that Harry was playing his game, and treating him like some clever pet. Harry loathed being treated that way, but since he had to rescue Sirius, he didn’t think that he could spend a lot of time voicing doubts.

“There!”

Harry blinked as the calendar, parchment, and quill shot away from Hermione, and she turned, taking the Time Turner out of her robes and beckoning to him. Harry started towards her, and found himself staggering as he actually got there. The pain in his head and his gut was flaring again. Harry blinked, and saw white spots, and then saw Hermione’s white face.

“Harry,” Hermione whispered. “I could go back by myself, and then you could go to the hospital wing and rest—“

"No," Harry whispered. He didn't dare trust that. The letter-writer might think that Harry wasn't playing by the rules of the game if that happened. And worse, Hermione might accidentally forget a word of the prophecy, or misremember what it said. Harry couldn't take the chance. He needed to hear the prophecy for himself, and hear the exact intonation with which Trelawney had repeated it.

He folded the parchment so that Hermione couldn't look at the conversation he'd had with Peter or whoever was holding the quill, and met her eyes defiantly. "I wouldn't sleep anyway," he pointed out. "I think Connor's running headlong into danger. And you know how protective I still am of him."

Hermione sniffed. "Without reason, sometimes." But she didn't argue any longer, pulling out the chain of the Time Turner and looping it around his neck. Harry tried to breathe as normally as possible while she held the hourglass up between them.

"We'll have to be careful when we get there," Hermione warned him solemnly. "We don't dare be seen by ourselves while we're in the past."

Harry smiled slightly as he felt the spider come to life in his robe pocket, its legs swarming and scraping at the cloth. "I think I know exactly what to do."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but began to invert the hourglass, chanting, "One. Two. Three..."

Harry joined the count, though he hated to hear how weak his voice had become. Stupid body. It can't fall down on me now. I can't afford to let it.

The world around them blurred and rippled like cloth. Harry didn't look too directly at it, since it made him dizzy and gave him a worse headache, but the voice riding behind his eyes seemed to enjoy it. Oooo. I never traveled in time before. Look! There's someone we must have passed hours ago. Whee!

They reached the last turn, and then Hermione gripped the hourglass and kept it from inverting again. Harry stood locked within the chain, panting. They hadn't traveled physically—they were still standing in the same stretch of empty Gryffindor Tower corridor as before—but he felt as tired as if they had.

"Harry?" Hermione's whisper was nearly timid. "I really think that you should lie down and rest."

Harry shook his head and smiled grimly at her. "No time. The prophecy happened ten minutes after the hour, and we've come just on it. We've got to move." He began to do so, using his magic recklessly to feed his flagging strength when he had to. It wasn't as though he had a better use for it.

Hermione trotted beside him with alacrity, and didn't even flinch when Harry cast the Disillusionment Charm on both of them, despite the cold feeling that it produced. Harry found the cold invigorating. On they moved, and then they were in the North Tower corridor, and Harry saw Hermione storming down the hallway, her face set. Knowing now what Connor had said to her, Harry couldn't blame her at all for being so disgusted. They watched her out of sight, and then shuffled forward.

Harry came on himself, staring in concern after Hermione. He took a deep breath, snatched a small stone from his robe pocket, and tossed it at his past self.

His past self focused on the stone, staring at it with a dark expression that Harry hadn't realized was so frightening on his own face. Harry pulled the stone down the corridor with his magic, and saw his past self draw his wand. That was the moment at which he added the spider.

His past self immediately became more concerned with the spider, which scuttled towards him with lifted mandibles, than with any potentially Disillusioned people sneaking along the walls. Hermione wanted to linger and watch the fight, but Harry gripped her arm and steered her past with main force.

Climbing the ladder was the hardest part, since they had to do it invisibly, and in as much silence as possible, and while keeping the chain of the Time Turner around both of their necks. Harry finally levitated the both of them, hearing Hermione squeak when he used both wandless and wordless magic to do so. But they didn't have time to wait. Beneath them came the blast of the "Reducto!" that had reduced the spider to smithereens, and past-Harry wouldn't be far behind.

Harry kept up the levitation once they were in the Tower, and they skimmed until they settled into the classroom entrance. Even then, Harry feared they would be too late, but they ducked through the veiled arch just as Trelawney, in front of Connor and Ron, rolled her eyes back and began her recitation of the prophecy.

Harry leaned against the wall, keeping his panting silent, and listened as hard as he could. This was the prophecy that Connor had been willing to fight him to keep hidden. It must be important in some way, even if Harry wasn't sure what that would be yet.

Trelawney's voice was a grating moan, a sound that was hardly human, and one that should have been too male to come out of the fluttering woman's throat.

"Five weeks before the time of longest light

There comes one who puts lesser foes to flight,

Who has a soul and magic cold as ice.

Now comes the hour

Of the black one's power,

And he shall die by the wand of the sacrifice."

Oh, Connor, Harry thought, his heart speeding fast enough to make him sick. No wonder you thought that I was going to kill Sirius.

"Now comes the hour all truth is revealed,

Now comes the hour the gray one takes the field,

And first decision sets the path for all.

Now kindness is tested,

Now soft heart must be bested,

And on that test he will stand or fall."

Harry saw himself come charging through the classroom at that moment, and he gripped the Time Turner and began to turn it. His past-self's head swung around, and Harry knew he had seen the gleam of silver that marked the place where his future-self and Hermione left.

Everything had gone as it was supposed to do, then, and now the prophecy bounced around in Harry's head, buzzing like an angry fly, even as he chanted the count of the Time Turner's inversions aloud with Hermione and the world warped and changed around them.

Five weeks before the time of longest light. That must mean five weeks before the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. And, well, this weekend is that. Approximately. No wonder Connor panicked when he thought I'd taken Sirius somewhere or done something with him today.

There comes one who puts lesser foes to flight... I don't understand that part. I know Connor thought it was me, though. And the part about having magic cold as ice fits as well. And what would my brother know about my soul?

The sadness of that thought threatened to distract him for a moment, from both the prophecy and the count of the Time Turner's inversions, but Harry turned his mind determinedly back.

The black one's power...no doubt Connor thought that meant Sirius, though I don't understand how he can be in power if he's a captive.

And “die by the wand of the sacrifice” sounds pretty damn blunt. Either I’m going to kill him, or Peter will.

I don’t understand the rest. I suppose that the gray one could be the gray Dementor, but if the Dementors had some reliable way of finding Peter, they would have used it by now, and then perhaps we wouldn’t be in this mess.

They chanted the final number, and then Hermione gripped the Time Turner and held it still again. Harry blinked around the empty Divination classroom, then removed the Charm from both himself and Hermione. A glance out the window showed that it was still late afternoon, only slowly slanting towards sunset. Harry nodded. That meant he shouldn’t meet many people on his way to...wherever it was that the letter-writer wanted him to go; they would be either lingering outside still, or heading to dinner.

The parchment rattled. Harry unfolded it and read it.

The place where Connor and Sirius practiced their lessons, Harry. The last safe place. Oh, yes, did I mention that I have your brother now, too?

Harry felt a flash of anger. Hermione gave a little shriek as the walls around them abruptly froze, and then she slipped on a patch of ice, and tugged on the Time Turner’s chain. Harry ducked his head to get it over his neck, never removing his eyes from the parchment. So he had to rescue two captives instead of one. That wasn’t such a huge change, and it would only give him more rage to take Peter, or whoever this was, down with him.

Without killing Sirius, if at all possible.

The parchment finished, The Shrieking Shack.

Harry nodded sharply. He liked that answer. He approved of that answer. He would be dealing with Peter off Hogwarts grounds, then, and in a place that most people still believed was haunted. He turned to leave.

“Harry!”

He paused and blinked back at Hermione, who was scrambling to her feet. She had her wand out and a look of confusion on her face.

“What was all that about?” she demanded. “Did the prophecy say what I think it said? Are you going to kill Sirius?”

Harry shook his head. “Prophecies are notoriously vague and hard to interpret,” he lied smoothly. “I don’t think that’s what it means. And now I’m going to find Connor and tell him so. I think I know where he might have gone.”

“I want to go with you,” said Hermione. “You’re not well enough to face him alone. Or get Draco, at least, though I would think I’m less likely to get angry and send a spell at Connor.”

Harry let out a careful breath and shifted from side to side. It was only his imagination that his stomach was churning, he reminded himself. The voice in his head had said this wasn’t the kind of pain that would make him sick. “Hermione, I can’t. This is something I have to do alone.”

“I knew it,” said Hermione, with the soft, vicious tone of a pouncing cat, and then her hand shot out and grabbed the parchment before Harry could stop her. She looked down at the writing, and her eyes widened as she read. Harry simply thanked Merlin that the whole conversation wasn’t there.

When she looked up, her eyes were still wide, and her face pale enough to make her gaze stand out as drowning dark. “Harry,” she breathed. “What is this?”

“Something bad,” said Harry shortly. He had to hope that the writer wouldn’t consider Hermione’s reading of his letter to be a betrayal of the game they had played so far. “Listen, Hermione, I’ve got to go.”

Hermione laughed, though it was more like a bark—short and unamused. “If you think I’m going to let you go into danger when

you're this sick, alone, you're mad. I won't insist that we tell any of the professors if you don't want to, but we are going together."

Harry shook his head. "Consopio," he said, and Hermione fell asleep. "Wingardium Leviosa," he added, and eased her to the floor.

Then he snatched up the parchment, scanning it anxiously. The writer hadn't added anything. Harry began to walk out of the Divination classroom, but had to stop and lean against the wall, his face to the stone as he panted.

Could he really do this? The weakness in his body was growing, and the magic he poured into it drained out immediately, like water through a holed cloth. Could he really go and confront Sirius's and Connor's kidnapper on his own?

It isn't a matter of ability, Harry thought, as he opened his eyes and straightened. It's a matter of necessity. I have to go alone because Peter, or whoever this was, won't let me bring any help.

You have me.

Harry jumped a bit before he realized that the voice was coming from inside his head. Oh, yes, you, he thought back, as he eased out of the Divination classroom and towards the ladder. I don't suppose you've remembered who you are.

No. But I remember that I could see through Sirius's eyes, too, because he had a connection to Voldemort in the form of the curse. I can't right now. I don't know why. Maybe Peter did something to keep me out. The voice sounded sulky. But if we get close enough to him, and I can break this barrier that prevents me from seeing, I might be able to help you. Or maybe I can even enter Peter's mind and tell you what he plans to do next.

Thank you, Harry murmured.

He made his way out of the North Tower and carefully through the corridors towards the front entrance. He made liberal use of the Disillusionment Charm to hide from the people who passed him,

despite the sickness swimming in his gut. He supposed he could have Apparated directly to the Shrieking Shack, as he had once before, but that kind of Apparition on Hogwarts grounds would definitely have attracted attention, from Dumbledore if no one else. Harry wanted to keep anyone else out of this. The more people got involved, the more loss of life there would be.

Harry reached the entrance hall and allowed himself to feel something like triumph. He would be out beyond the doors in a few moments, and from there he could make his way to the Whomping Willow. He knew from seeing Sirius do it earlier in the year how to open the tunnel that led to the Shack.

“Impedimenta.”

Harry let out an involuntary cry as his feet went out from under him, and then the Disillusionment Charm boiled away like so much steam. He turned his head, and saw Snape climbing the stairs from the dungeons, his wand out and a gleam in his eyes like some maddened hippogriff.

“You are not going anywhere,” Snape whispered, as he stalked closer. Harry shivered. The lower Snape’s voice went, the angrier he was, and this time it was so soft as to sound like rat’s paws on stone. “You are staying right here, and if I must bind you and knock you unconscious to keep you from risking your life, then I will. I am tired of this, Harry. You have given me no chance to act like a true guardian. I will protect you from the consequences of your own Gryffindor-like stupidity, if I must.”

“You don’t understand,” Harry whispered, struggling to stand. The jinx still wouldn’t let him go, and the knock he’d taken on the head when he fell, as well as the pain in his gut, was distracting him from his efforts to break the spell. “Connor and Sirius are at risk. They’ll probably die if I don’t get to them—“

“I don’t care!”

“Peter says that he’ll sacrifice Sirius to insure the Dark Lord’s return,” Harry hissed, as he found Snape standing right over him, and his

anger came back. The stones beneath him froze. "Do you really want that? Voldemort, risen again and running around?" He glanced pointedly at Snape's left arm.

Snape's eyes flickered briefly, and then he said, "Dumbledore has more than enough power to face Voldemort, and more than enough reason to hunt Pettigrew, if his golden boys are captured. Tell me where they are, and I will alert him. After placing you in the hospital wing, of course."

"No," Harry said, even as the parchment rattled. He twisted his head to look at it, sprawled on the floor beside him, and saw new words appearing.

Where are you, Harry? Delayed? Oh, dear, I don't think I like that. And I don't think that your brother really needs two arms, does he?

Harry shrieked, but the voice in his head spoke quickly, before he could build up a true head of panic. Let me. Harry felt it drift away from him as it had once before.

The next moment, Snape staggered and clutched his head. He tried to focus his eyes, and Harry suspected he was using Occlumency, or Legilimency, or a combination of both, to try and throw the voice off. It wasn't working, obviously. Harry couldn't help a brief, twisted smile. I did try to tell him that that voice doesn't speak through any connection in his mind.

Snape abruptly slipped to the floor, eyes blank. The voice slid back into Harry's head and snorted. He'll be out until he manages to wake up from the memories that I gave him.

You remember who you are now? Harry stood, and found that, yes, he could manage it. His legs wobbled, but he still stood straight. And he was not going to think about Peter cutting Connor's arm off, because he wasn't.

Not really, said the voice. Only that I was once in a great deal of pain. I gave him some of the pain, not as much as I gave you. That ought to keep him busy for a while. It sounded smug.

Harry shook his head, and hoped Snape would understand when he came back and woke him up and explained everything.

If he came back and woke him up and explained everything.

Harry let out a long, hissing breath and turned towards the doors out into the grounds. So he might die. He had accepted that from the time he was four. He shouldn't be shaking in his shoes now at the thought of it.

And he wasn't, he realized with some startlement, as he staggered out the doors and into the cool brightness of a spring evening. He was more upset at the thought of never being able to explain to Snape and Draco and Hermione why it had been necessary to hurt them, or ignore them, or insist they stay behind.

My priorities really are strange, he thought, as he maneuvered carefully across the grass towards the Whomping Willow. I had my brother first for so long, and then things changed, and I don't even know what I think of as most important any more.

I could root around in your mind and find out for you, the voice offered, but Harry shook his head.

"We really don't have time," he whispered, as he shot wary glances off to the side, looking for anyone who might spot him and call out, or for some sign of Hagrid. The grass was empty, though, save for the grasping fingers of sunlight, and Hagrid was nowhere in sight. Harry relaxed marginally, but kept his caution up.

The Whomping Willow sprang into motion as Harry neared, the branches cutting through the air and slamming into the ground. Harry shook his head and reached out, carefully thickening the air near the knot on the willow's trunk. When he thought it was thick enough, he shot it forward, and the knot pushed home. The willow's branches froze, and Harry ducked beneath them and towards the tunnel that he could see between the roots.

He knew the moment he pushed into the tunnel and began to creep forward that this was going to be hell.

The pain in his stomach grew worse the longer it was pressed against the ground. The pain in his brow blazed harder and faster and fiercer as he kept his head bowed so that he could scramble beneath the overhangs. Every muscle in his body ached and screamed with tension as he contorted himself into odd positions to get past the bumps and the jerks in the trail. Add the worry about Connor and Sirius, and by the time he arrived at the entrance to the Shrieking Shack, Harry was worried that he wouldn't be able to stand up and fight Peter properly.

He could feel strong magic humming beyond the door, waiting. If this wasn't a ritual to resurrect Voldemort, then it was something else damn close. Harry closed his eyes and wailed to himself.

I can't do this! I can barely stand upright.

Of course, the answer that came back was always the same, mingled with echoes of his mother's voice and his own.

You must do it because there is no one else. You must do it because you're the strongest, and it's the responsibility of the strongest to carry the burdens that no one else can. You must do it because it's necessary.

Harry began, gently, to breathe in a pattern that Lily had taught him. This, granted, was when she had been teaching him what to do if he was ever tortured, and the last time he had used it was when Quirrell's Crucio had hit him in first year. But it was still valuable, and it worked, letting him rise above the pain that plagued him in stomach and head. Even when his scar abruptly blazed with agony, he could look past it and see what had to be done, stretching like a path before him.

That's impressive, the voice said, in subdued tones. Where did you learn it? A rooting, shuffling sensation, and then the voice said, Oh. Harry had the sensation of it backing carefully out of a certain corner of his memories.

Harry smiled. He knew it was probably a grim smile, but no one was here to be frightened. "From my mother," he murmured, and stood. His legs did not shake. His resolve and his magic were one, now, and his magic was no longer trickling out of him, spent, the moment he sent it into his muscles. He only had to strengthen his will, and it did what he wanted, instead of the other way around. "I am still what she made me, even now."

Irony teased him for a moment, and then was gone. Harry called on his rage instead, and watched, detached, as the tunnel around him swelled with frost.

He was doing what had to be done, because there was no one else.

Connor and Sirius were waiting.

Harry reached out and pushed the door open.

Chapter Forty: Danse Macabre

Harry moved a step into the Shack. He saw the bed before him, the edge of a foot sticking out from beyond it, the marking of what could be a circle traced on the floor—

And then he felt powerful magic slam down in front of him and to the sides and behind, and the door slammed and sealed itself shut. Harry tensed. Quite apart from the strength of the magic, he didn't think that anyone else would be getting in behind him to help.

You are not alone, the voice in his head breathed, but it sounded distracted. All of this...it feels familiar...

Then Harry heard the clear, cold laughter he had been imagining while he held the letter, but it was a familiar voice that spoke the words, "Hold him. The dance is about to begin."

Harry felt the magic fall into place around him, gripping him as tightly as a full body-bind. Sick with rage, he watched Sirius step from beyond the bed, his eyes wide and quite mad, his smile bizarre. Harry's heart thumped and stuck in his throat, and the voice of his own thoughts whispered, It wasn't Peter. It never was.

Harry couldn't shake his head, he found when he tried to move, but he could still speak. "Why, Sirius?" he whispered. "I thought you were sane now, after the golden ornament managed to tame your thoughts."

Sirius clucked his tongue at him and lifted the ornament over his head. "Poor Potter," he said, voice almost familiar. The sound was Sirius's, but the intonations were someone else's, Harry knew. "Do you mean to tell me that you didn't figure it out? I was so sure you would." He tapped the golden ornament with his wand. "Finite Incantatem!"

The ornament shifted and shivered, and then an intricate illusion charm melted away from it. What was left was heavy and gold, and hung on the end of a chain, but was assuredly not the ruby-studded ball that Sirius had worn for months now. It was a locket instead, with

a rusted clasp, marked with an ornate S that Harry recognized after a few moments of staring.

Slytherin's mark.

And now that the locket was free of what must have been powerful spells to disguise its magic as well as its shape, Harry could feel it. It was humming, all but snarling, shedding a cold aura. It felt...

It felt like the diary that Harry had held last year, the one that had contained a piece or memory of Voldemort.

Harry could feel himself stop breathing.

Sirius looked down fondly at the locket, shaking his head slightly. When he looked up, Harry could see Tom Riddle in his smile, though the intonations were not exactly the same as Tom Riddle's, and not the same as Harry had heard from Voldemort's mouth when he fought him as Quirrell, either. "This locket lay among the Black treasures for years. They never suspected what they had. And then your old godfather, in searching for weapons that he could use to train your precious brother, found it and picked it up." Sirius chuckled, a sound that, like his smile, was turned sideways from what it should have been. "And I was free. In his head, at least."

My nightmare, Harry thought. Something small destroying Sirius, and the pain I felt when it happened. Not a rat after all. That was the piece of Voldemort swallowing the last freedom of his mind.

He met Harry's eyes and smiled unpleasantly. "You'll have guessed that I'm part of Voldemort, of course, but no sixteen-year-old boy. I have forty years of his memories. And I'm far more experienced than Tom Riddle was, I think you'll find, and far more sane than my latest incarnation." A spasm of distaste crossed Sirius's borrowed face. "I shall have to make a special point of finding and killing him, when I've completed this ritual," he muttered.

And then we'll have two Voldemorts to face.

The thought terrified Harry as few other things could have. He began to struggle in earnest, his magic snapping and beating at the bindings. But they held him immobile, and Voldemort-in-Sirius didn't seem at all bothered by his fight. In fact, he cocked his head to the side, looking mildly puzzled, until he suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Oh, that's right," he said. "You didn't win the game. You didn't anticipate all my moves. You didn't guess about the locket, and you didn't guess what I was going to do once you got here. Well, really, Harry." More than anything he had done so far, Harry hated the chiding, playful tone his voice took on, as bad as the worse messages written on the parchment. "You should have. I was kind enough to tell you."

He looked at something on the other side of the bed. "Kreacher!"

A house elf came into view. Harry felt his face twist in disgust. The creature was beyond shabby, with knotted hair hanging down around its face and an expression full of fawning adoration as it looked up at Voldemort.

"Master Black is wanting something?" he asked. "The Master Black who became a true heir of the mistress is wanting something?"

"Move this boy into place in the circle," Voldemort instructed, striding around the bed. He leaned heavily to the left, Harry noticed, and hoped that that indicated a weakness he could exploit. Merlin knew he needed something. "The one I indicated to you earlier, mind, and not an inch to right or left."

"Master Black is being very good to Kreacher, letting him participate in important rituals," said the house elf, bowing from the waist and seizing Harry's arm with nails so long they drew blood. "Kreacher will not let Master Black down!"

He dragged Harry around the bed, and Harry could see the room fully now. There was a circle scratched on the floor, drawn in some thick liquid that did not look like either blood or ink to Harry. Kreacher positioned him carefully, still hopelessly bound, on the near side of the circle, with his heels treading on the dangling cover of the bed.

On the other side lay Connor. He was awake, his face ashen and his horrified eyes fixed on Sirius. They flicked to Harry for a moment, and Harry could see the terror in them briefly dim to shock. Then it turned to despair, and Connor turned his head away, tears trickling down his face.

Harry felt part of him ache with pity. It was only part, though; the rest of him was taking note of the fact that Connor could move, and thinking that it might be important.

I'm here, too, the voice in his head reminded him.

Can you do anything? Harry asked, watching as his godfather's body stooped down and gathered several small objects together into a heap. There was a knife, and a Pensieve, and a draped object that Voldemort treated more carefully than all the rest.

I don't know, said the voice unhappily. I can't see into his mind—most of it. But there's a part I can read, and its thoughts make no sense. They're twisting and plotting to stop him. That doesn't make sense, does it? The voice sounded as though it were appealing to Harry.

Harry swallowed. What he was about to think sounded mad and desperate, but if there was the slightest chance... Sirius? Could that part be Sirius?

The voice gave a squeal of the kind that it had when they were traveling through time. Yes! Yes, it is! Thank you, Harry! It's him! There's part of him still alive and sane in there! The voice turned puzzled. But then, I don't understand why he's not attacking. Why is he just waiting?

I don't think Voldemort knows he's there, or he wouldn't have let him remain, Harry decided. He's waiting for the best moment.

Part of him hoped that was it, and that Sirius wouldn't turn into a coward unable to face what he had done again. But since all he could do was wait, he decided he might as well wait and hope.

"You've given me a lot of trouble, you know," Voldemort went on conversationally, turning around and carefully setting the draped object in front of him. "I couldn't decide how best to take revenge on you, even when I knew that I was getting a body back, thanks to your dear godfather. I pumped your brother's ears full of poison, nonsense about Slytherins being evil and compulsion being good." Harry saw Connor flinch as if someone had driven needles into him. Voldemort didn't seem to notice, but his smile did turn a touch crueler, so perhaps he had. "But, of course, you gave me the best idea yourself, or your godfather did, thinking about what you'd done. So I decided to wait until the second prophecy was about to come true, and seize the chance to take revenge on you, turn the prophecy into what I wanted it to mean, and change your perceptions of those who have helped you all at once."

He waited to be sure he had Harry's absolute attention—as if he had a choice about facing forward with his head clasped by the magic, Harry thought—and then drew the cloth dramatically off the small object.

It was a dark container, made of what Harry thought was yew wood, the wood of death and resurrection. Despite the lack of rowan wood, he had no trouble recognizing it as a reparations box.

"But—you can't," he said, the first words to tumble through his thoughts. "The justice ritual can only be used on someone who's really wronged you."

Voldemort gave him a deep, jagged smile. "Oh, I think you have wronged me, Harry. But since when have you known me to use neutral or wholesome magic? I am going to use the magic of the ritual. It's that which holds you even now, and will prevent any human from entering this place. But I will twist it, and insure that it does what I want it to do." He stroked the yew box. "This will open to me again, unlike a rowan box, when I have completed the ritual and taken your magic, so that I might absorb your power. It's mine in the first place."

He smiled directly into Harry's eyes. "Always remember, you were the one who gave me this idea, with what you did to your mother." Harry saw Connor jump and flinch out of the corner of his eye again.

Harry rose above the panic, the terror, the guilt, and stared calmly at Voldemort. “I did the right thing,” he said. “You’re perverting the justice ritual to your own ends.”

Voldemort only laughed, as if not at all fazed by his failure to intimidate Harry, and turned to Kreacher, who had retreated off to the side, to stand with his head bowed. “Kreacher!”

“Master Black?” Kreacher looked up, eyes adoring.

“Bring me the knife.”

Kreacher hurried to scoop up the blade and bring it Voldemort’s hand. This close, Harry could make out that the hilt was ebony, the blade some dull metal he did not think was either silver or steel. A silver serpent was etched on the hilt, just above the words Toujours pur.

“The Blacks understand family,” said Voldemort softly, turning the knife over and over. “They always did, until this last generation, when both their sons turned traitor, in different ways.”

The voice in the back of Harry’s head made what sounded like an incoherent noise of protest.

“And they made magical items that could certainly affect family,” said Voldemort. “Polaris!”

The knife trembled and came alive, twitching, in Voldemort’s hand, which was Sirius’s hand. Harry stared. He knew now what the knife must be—a blade like the one Lucius had sent him, capable of severing ties of love and loyalty and magic between family members.

Voldemort began to walk towards Connor.

“No,” said Harry. He spoke calmly enough, but he could feel the bubble of rage building up inside of him, and wasn’t surprised when his magic went mad.

The invisible force flung Kreacher to the far side of the room, wringing a snarl out of him as he hit the wall. Sirius turned as if to face a strong wind, one that made him list more to the left than ever. He put one hand over his face and clucked his tongue at Harry, laughing mockingly.

"If you could have stopped this, then you would have done so the first time you called your magic," he said. He raised his head and began to chant. "What you have done to me cannot be forgiven. I have no wish to face you in a duel, nor to arrange legal means of settling the insult."

Harry felt his own magic settle, stilled, under the weight of the far greater power that the justice ritual called forth. Shadows flickered madly in the room, above the outline of the circle. Voldemort watched them with a smile for a moment, then put out one hand. It was Sirius's broom-callused palm that was offered to the air, but Harry could not think of it as his hand again. He doubted that he would ever be able to, even if he somehow managed to separate Sirius and Voldemort out from each other's minds. Voldemort had been possessing Sirius for months, and no one had noticed.

That must be driving Connor mad, Harry thought dimly.

"I demand this of the old powers," Voldemort said, "for my will is strong, and my desire for justice firm." He took two steps towards Connor and moved Polaris in a broad sweep. A shimmering line of connection sprang into being between Harry and Connor, a cord that manifested as a red glow. "With the power that comes from the connection between the one who has wronged me and his brother, I draw the magic, and I draw the will. Corrumpto castimoniam!"

He brought the knife down.

Harry screamed as he felt a binding he hadn't known was there strain and leak and begin to break. Connor screamed in the same moment, a noise like the verbal equivalent of internal bleeding, and flung an arm over his face, or so Harry thought in the moment before his head bent back and he felt magic wash from him.

He could hear Voldemort repeating, every few moments, his voice as steady as rainfall, "Corrumpo castimoniam! Corrumpo castimoniam!"

Harry's mind translated the incantation, whether or not he wanted it to. I corrupt the purity.

Harry felt magic twist and writhe, buck and scream. The magic of the justice ritual was abruptly trying to flee, as though the ritual had sensed the danger it was in of being used wrongly.

Harry wrenched his eyes open, and could see dark red light trailing from the connection between him and Connor, attacking the shadows that danced above the circle. The circle itself came to life in the same instant, striking out with pale gray tendrils that reminded Harry uncomfortably of the silver fire on Walpurgis Night. Voldemort flung his own magic behind that, holding Slytherin's locket above his head and chanting the spell over and over again.

Harry's stolen magic, Connor's stolen magic, Voldemort's own Dark power—it was all too much for the ritual. Harry felt the nature of it overthrown, felt the very atmosphere in the room change. Now, the shadows that crouched and sidled nearer him looked dark, not as if they would burst into red-gold light the way that the shadows of his own justice ritual had. The circle was blazing. The hold that settled on Harry's body was not simply firm, preventing him from moving until justice had been done, but actively cruel, pinching his skin like chains.

Harry was reeling. He could feel hot tears slipping down his cheeks, and though Merlin knew he had plenty to cry about, he realized he was mourning the loss of the dance's purity. Voldemort could not change the nature of the justice ritual for anyone else, or permanently, but within this shack, something old and beautiful had died. Voldemort had perverted its intent and brought it back to life as a shambling corpse, ready to snatch the price he asked from an innocent. It was wrong. It was obscene.

Harry met Connor's eyes. He knew his brother was shocked and hurt and terrified beyond measure—

No, he didn't. He could guess it from his expression, but he didn't know it any more, the way he had always done with no more than a glance. That was the tie that Voldemort had cut, a connection to his twin that Harry hadn't even known was there.

This time, the bubble of anger didn't give him any warning that it was coming. Instead, Harry flung back his head, tossing off the weight that crowned it, and screamed, unleashing the full force of his magic for the first time since the storm last year.

The shack shuddered. The walls raced into ice in a moment, and Kreacher became a frozen statue between one step and the next. Harry felt the ritual clamp down on him, but he didn't care. He wanted nothing so much as he wanted to kill Voldemort in that moment, and as Sirius's body staggered and leaned to the left, it seemed his wish would be granted.

But Voldemort recovered in a moment, and made a negligent gesture. Harry's magic calmed, his ice turning into water. Kreacher shivered as the ice on his body cracked open like a nutshell, and gave Harry a baleful look. Voldemort chuckled through Sirius's voice, the laughter colder than it had been.

"I am very glad to see that your magic is so strong, Harry," he said cheerfully. "It gives me pleasure to imagine what I shall do when that power is mine."

Harry stared at him through narrowed eyes. Briefly, he wondered where his fear had gone, and then decided that it didn't matter. He felt at his magic. It was bound, but it was stirring under the surface, and he knew there was one thing he could do that might work. Might was the operative word, of course. He couldn't know that it would, especially when the justice ritual, perverted and broken though it had been, would probably still prevent him from using any magic to escape, the way it had prevented Lily from doing so when Harry used it on her.

Voldemort laid Polaris down and picked up the Pensieve. He gazed into it for a moment, Sirius's eyes contemplative the way they had been whenever he had spoken of the past, then shook his head and

set it aside. "No," he said, as though speaking to someone else. "I do not think the time is right for that, yet. And if there is one way in which I am smarter than both my newest self and my sixteen-year-old one, it is knowing when the time is right."

He turned and smiled at Harry. "There will be plenty of time to show you the truth when I have stripped you of your power," he said. "In the meantime, before we begin that stripping, do you have any questions?"

The ritual loosened its fierce hold on Harry's chin and cheeks, and he could talk. He worked his jaw for a moment, eyes never moving from Voldemort's, and then said, "I don't understand why you wanted me to know the second prophecy."

Voldemort shrugged. "So that you could lose further hope, of course. You do know that it says you'll kill your dear godfather?"

Harry nodded tightly. He heard Connor's sobs coming from the corner, but couldn't turn his attention from Voldemort to comfort his brother. He just didn't have time right now.

"I wanted you to brood on that," Voldemort said, and smiled widely. "Just as I wanted you to think that Peter was writing to you to break your hope. You cannot suffer enough for what you have done to me."

"What do you care?" Harry snarled, playing for time. He needed to gain as much strength as he could before he struck, and to gauge it. Under all the imprisoning layers of ritual, his magic was moving, but he knew if he simply unleashed it now, Connor would be hurt as well as Voldemort. "What I did was to your old self and Tom Riddle, not you."

"I would have become much more powerful the moment I manifested, if not for you," said Voldemort, losing his smile for the first time. "And I would never have had to go to the trouble of arranging this ritual." He shook his head. "You are going to have to pay for the inconvenience that you caused me."

He turned and snapped his fingers. "Kreacher!"

"Master Black," said the house elf, hastening forward.

"Help me disrobe," said Voldemort, and held out Sirius's arms.

Kreacher, bowing and fluttering, began to pull his clothes off. Voldemort looked back over his shoulder at Harry.

"Everything I wrote you in the letter was quite true," he said casually. "Sirius has been betraying you for months, whenever my old self's presence in his mind became too much for him. And then he picked me up, in the locket, and was foolish enough to put me on to see what he did. And that was the end. He'd managed to withstand or undermine my old self's attempts to hurt you; he chose to send that snake, for example, because he knew you were a Parselmouth and had a decent chance of stopping it. The spiders were mine, though I only meant their poison to weaken you. That was when I knew that I had complete control over this body and mind. Sirius was not able to object when I chose the spiders." He smiled.

"You were the one writing the letters to Lucius Malfoy," said Harry.

"Only the last one." Voldemort shrugged, and the robes came off his chest. "Sirius wrote the ones before, when the pressure of the curse, and Fenrir Greyback's and Walden Macnair's persuasions, became too much. Imagine, Harry. Your godfather might have been free of the curse long before I possessed him, only he was too proud to tell anyone."

Connor gave another sob. Harry suspected the barriers were falling in his mind, leaving him vulnerable to all sorts of truths.

Kreacher drew the robes almost completely off.

Harry gagged. There was a gray lump growing from Sirius's left side, pulsing gently in patterns of light and darkness. It looked like an egg, or at least mostly like an egg, since part of it was obviously still under Sirius's skin. It glistened with thick wetness, dark enough to look like blood, but obviously not it. Harry flicked a glance at the circle. He knew what it was made of, now.

"This will be ready in a moment." Voldemort stroked the egg's opaque side. "Your magic will enable me to hatch out a new body. Then I'll arrange for your godfather to die by your wand, and show you the truth, and depart." He looked at Harry with his head cocked on one side as Kreacher eased him down in the middle of the circle, his hands tender.

"Do you know what I will do first, Harry?" he breathed.

Harry stared stonily at him.

"What I gave Severus Snape was only a taste of what I will give him when we are done here." Voldemort's eyes glittered. "Not only is he a traitor, he dared to aid you. He will be flayed alive, inch by inch. There are spells that can do that. I will leave him no skin but that which bears my Dark Mark, and cast the Mark on every inch of his skinless flesh. The Mark will keep him alive, but it will also prevent any healing magic.

"Then I will go after those you are so fond of, the young Mudblood witch and the Malfoy boy. The Mudblood may have a fairly quick death, I think, with only a few broken limbs and mutilations first. After all, she did help you to learn the second prophecy, and indirectly to play my game.

"Draco Malfoy..." Voldemort's eyes were feral now. "He will stay alive, and come with me. I will send him back to his father, a piece at a time, over many years. The Prometheus Curse will do."

Harry shuddered in spite of himself. The Prometheus Curse renewed every part of a body the moment it was cut off, in the way that Prometheus's liver renewed itself every day after being eaten by an eagle. The thought of Draco, suffering, unable to die, nearly made Harry launch his best weapon right then. But he refrained, and asked, quietly, "What will you do with my brother?"

Voldemort glanced in Connor's direction. "Why, I have been training him these past three months," he said. "It would be a shame to let such a well-trained and natural compeller go to waste. Imperio should

remove any obstinate moral fixations he has, and then I have a follower skilled in doing Dark magic."

Harry nodded, calmly. It was what he needed to hear. It gave him the final bit of anger he needed in order to act as he had to, and it held out a promise, a faint hope, that if he failed here, then the Boy-Who-Lived might yet keep close to Voldemort's side and one day fell him.

If he failed.

I am not going to fail.

Voldemort held up one hand. "Mors Mordre!" he said clearly.

A glowing green Dark Mark appeared above his head, casting sparks down into the center of the circle. The magic of the corrupted ritual tightened in anticipation, and Harry supposed Voldemort had spoken to it silently.

Voldemort faced him, that same faint smile on his face. "I will take a payment from you," he said, "a weregild for all you have done to me. One time, one shattering price for another shattering price, one apology made in terms that I have decided. We will make the exchange, and it will be done." His smile twisted at the edges. "Last time pays for all."

The magic of the ritual reached down, and Harry saw the immense hand form, a sickly dark gray this time, coasting towards his body to remove his magic.

He unleashed his ability to eat magic.

It chewed its way out from the inside, through the layers of ritual and Voldemort's binding spells, swallowing all the powerful magic that lay on top it. It consumed them, and Harry felt his body swell with the rush of power as it handed that magic to him instead. He concentrated. He wanted to break free of this spell, and stop Voldemort, blast away the gray lump emerging from his side.

Voldemort roared, a wordless sound of protest, and closed his eyes in concentration. The sickly gray hand drifted a little nearer.

Harry envisioned his power as a snake, and sent it crawling out in front of him, eating everything in its path, working its jaws wider and wider. The hold on his body abruptly eased, and he dropped to the floor. He felt the power around him surging wildly as the snake ate and ate, consumed and devoured, snapped and tore, and he grew steadily more and more powerful, feeling his eyes bulge in his head.

A small movement off to the side distracted him. Harry blinked as he saw a gray rat dart along the wall, rolling a slender stick in front of it with a paw. Peter, Harry knew, and he'd brought along his wand.

His snake began eating the gray lump in Sirius's side, and Harry gagged. He felt as though he were drowning in filth. For the first time, it occurred to him that siphoning off Dark magic might not be a good idea.

"No!" Voldemort cried, and chanted once again, "Corrumpto castimoniam!"

Harry felt the ritual begin fighting him. This was still mighty magic, stronger than he was even with all he had swallowed. The sickly gray hand formed anew, and reached out for him. Harry felt the chill brush of its fingers like the touch of flaying knives.

Then his snake turned and lunged at Connor's and Peter's magic, and Kreacher landed on his back with a spitting snarl.

Harry dropped to his knees, trying to wrestle the house elf off. It wasn't working. His magic snapped around him wildly, out of control. Harry tried to restrain it, to turn it away from eating Connor's power or Peter's. He might as well have tried to stop a waterfall. Strength pounded through him, useless as that waterfall to someone who only wanted a drink. He could neither halt nor master it.

Dirty fingers found and locked around his throat, and nails scored it. Harry tried to force power into his hands to tear them off, and nearly drained Connor of magic entirely, and nearly let the gray hand of the

corrupted ritual through. He gasped, sobbed, and pulled back, trying to decide what he should do—risk killing Kreacher, risk draining his brother or Peter, risk being stripped of magic entirely and resurrecting Voldemort—

He's doing it!

Harry could hear the voice in his head, its clear, ringing tones cutting through all the other nonsense there, the desperate whirl of fears and plans. He forced his eyes up when the voice urged him, Look at Voldemort! Look, look, look!

Voldemort was clutching his head, which shook wildly. His eyes bulged, and he appeared to be wearing two different expressions at once.

Harry dragged his magic back from feeding on Connor again, and pushed Kreacher back from tearing his throat open again, and shouted, What's happening?

The voice replied at once. Sirius is charging! Sirius is fighting! This is what he was waiting for, what he was harboring all his strength for! I can see him, like a great black dog springing on a wolf! He's wrestling him, he's drowning him, he's taking his mind back—

Voldemort's groping hand abruptly hit Sirius's wand, and Harry thought he would lift it and strike at himself. Then his fingers spasmed, and he knocked it away. Harry supposed one of his selves didn't want to risk the other using it.

And Harry knew Voldemort would win in the end. There was the locket around his neck, and Voldemort was a skilled Legilimens. It could only end one way.

Yes, it could.

Understanding of the prophecy flooded into Harry's head, and he felt calmer than he had in a long time, even as his magic bucked wildly against its reins, growing stronger with every second that passed, as he swallowed more and more of it, and that in turn fed his ability to

swallow more and more. He whistled sharply, and that caught the snake's attention. Harry pointed out, helpfully, how powerful the magic in the locket around Voldemort's neck must be.

His magic lunged forward and grabbed the locket—and yes, it was familiar, the same kind of power that it had swallowed when it destroyed the diary. It tore it open, snacking, feasting, glutting itself. Harry heard Voldemort scream.

And then Sirius's eyes were looking at him, and they were his godfather's, flashing gray and apologetic for a moment.

Harry used a bit of his magic to send Kreacher flying entirely free, and then shouted, "Peter! Roll the wand to me!"

He could feel the wand when it settled against his hand. There was no doubt that Peter had brought it for him, had intended for him to use it against Voldemort, and Harry was a bit sorry to disappoint him.

He tossed it underhanded to Sirius.

He heard Peter's squeak and Connor's wail, but they didn't understand. Neither of them understood. Neither of them had been battle-trained in the way Harry had, and neither of them understood the prophecy as he did in that instant, watching Sirius catch Peter's wand and stand.

Already, his face was flickering, showing signs of Voldemort returning. But, as it turned out, he did have time to say six words.

"Goodbye, Harry." He smiled slightly, and his eyes turned to the side. "Goodbye, Connor." His gaze faced forward again, fixing on the wand he held. Harry saw the bright Gryffindor courage there, the bravery in the face of death that the other Houses considered them mad for.

"Avada Kedavra."

And as the green light struck, killing Sirius, killing Voldemort with him, as Sirius died by the wand of the sacrifice, Harry brought his magic

down in a Reducto that broke Voldemort's yew reparations box to pieces.

The justice ritual twisted a final time, and smashed free. Mightier magic than Harry's shoved his own magic back into his body, burned the circle away, tore the gray egg emerging from Sirius's side to shreds, ate the Dark Mark, and vented itself on Kreacher's body until the house elf was a series of small and bloody pieces, destroying everything that had been used to confine it and perpetrate injustice. Harry's snake had to vomit up most of the power it had swallowed. And Harry found that he could control what was left, so long as he thought, in utter determination, about not hurting anyone.

The dance broke apart, Voldemort's spell of corruption ceasing, and the shack shuddered a final time as the ritual fled. Sirius's body shook, too, a faint tendril of red-gold light caressing it. Harry nodded as the light flickered out. The ritual was simply making sure there was no more justice to be done, but there was not.

Last time pays for all, Harry thought.

Then the light was gone, and they were left—Peter crouching as a rat in the corner, Connor sobbing near the remains of the circle, and Harry kneeling on the floor with his throat bleeding—in utter silence.

Chapter Forty-One: October 31, 1981

When he could breathe, and when he had felt, with one hand, that the wound on his throat was not about to tear open any further, the first thing Harry did was crawl over to his brother.

Connor lay on his side, one arm still wrapped around his face as he cried, though he cried without sound. Harry hesitated for a moment. He could no longer sense his brother's emotions as he once had, but other bonds were still there. He still felt as though Connor were his twin. He still felt loyalty, and he still felt love.

Relieved that Polaris had not cut all their bonds, Harry held out his arms and whispered, "Connor?"

Connor didn't hesitate, but turned around and embraced him, one arm locking around his shoulders and one around his waist. Harry bowed his head carefully onto his brother's shoulder in return and closed his eyes.

I am sorry that he had to grow up this way, he thought. At least the most painful part is done, and he got to hear Sirius say goodbye, and he knows why Sirius died. Harry thought he would have never been able to explain himself to Connor's satisfaction if he had gone alone to the Shrieking Shack and come back with a dead Sirius, or only Peter's word that he had not killed him.

Harry heard a scurry, and saw that Peter, in rat form, had come up beside them. He sat up on his haunches to touch his whiskers gently to Harry's elbow, then retreated towards his wand. Harry was grateful for the privacy, and went back to rubbing his brother's neck and spine, murmuring nonsense words that Connor could choose to take heed of if he wanted.

"Harry?" Connor whispered at last, when the sobbing had calmed enough to let him speak.

Harry murmured his attention.

"I—" Connor's voice cracked for a moment, then grew stronger. "I'm sorry."

Harry blinked. He had expected an apology, but not so soon. He sat back and tried to look into his twin's eyes, but he couldn't. Connor had pushed his face into the crook of Harry's neck and shoulder, and kept it there even as he whispered. Harry was surprised that his words were so clear, when cloth had to be muffling his mouth.

"I should have known," Connor whispered. "He acted so strangely. He didn't seem to love you at all in these last few months, as though your being put in Slytherin made him not your godfather any more. Before that, he always ranted and raved against Slytherins. These last few months, he just told me calmly all about their evil, and especially yours." He shuddered.

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he kept silent, other than the faint sound his hand made as it passed through his brother's hair.

"And I—I was so desperate to think that he would stay alive past May, and that my compulsion was good, that I listened to him," Connor whispered. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should have come to you with the prophecy."

You should have, Harry thought, but that was not the proper thing to say now, not that or any other variation of "I told you so." He had a chance to heal Connor's bleeding wound and let Connor heal his, but only if he was careful.

"I understand why you didn't," he said instead. "It seemed pretty clear when it said Sirius was going to die."

Connor nodded, a miserable motion accompanied by sniffling. He finally sat back enough for Harry to see his face. He looked half-destroyed, his eyes narrowed by the puffy red skin around them, his skin blotchy, his nose smeared with snot.

"And that's what happened," he whispered.

"It is." Harry glanced at Sirius's body, and felt the first touch of mourning for the man who had been his godfather, who had died so bravely, like a Gryffindor. He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't afford to cry, not right now. His headache was surging back, and the voice in his head was suspiciously silent, and he could not collapse yet, not when his brother needed him. "He died bravely."

"But he's still dead."

Harry blinked. He would have thought the reassurance of bravery would calm his brother. Perhaps Connor was not quite as far gone into the Gryffindor mentality as he thought, or perhaps he just didn't want that kind of comfort right now.

"Yes, he is," he said.

Connor closed his eyes. His lips, pressed together, trembled. Harry didn't touch him. He thought this was something his brother needed to work through on his own. And Connor didn't break down into tears, but visibly pulled himself together, with a resilience that Harry hadn't known he possessed. He opened his eyes and gave Harry a faint smile.

"You were telling the truth all along," he said.

"Well, not about Sirius being possessed," Harry said. "I didn't know about that. But about him not having your best interests at heart, and about Mum and the phoenix web, and about my intentions towards you." He took a deep breath. "Yes."

"I'm sorry," Connor whispered again.

Harry held still. Connor had that hitch in the back of his voice that said he wasn't finished speaking yet, and the last thing Harry wanted to do was interrupt him. He had to admit, part of him thought he deserved the speech that Connor was about to come out with, the one that wouldn't ever have emerged if Connor hadn't been here and watched the shattering of his childhood in front of his eyes.

Connor began speaking, hardly above a whisper and with his words all running together, but Harry had had ears mostly tuned to his voice for years. He could make out what his brother was saying, and he didn't need it to be any louder or clearer. This was about saying things, not saying them in some dramatic manner.

"I started suspecting you were telling me the truth with a letter Mum wrote me in February," Connor said to his hands. "She said that I had to keep fighting you, had to get you back under control. Why would she use that phrase? She'd always said before that she just loved you, and you were the one who turned on her. But that phrase made it sound like you were right, and she'd controlled you, and she just couldn't stand it that you'd broken the control and run away."

"And then the prophecy came, and I was so frightened that you would kill Sirius." Connor laughed unhappily, though for a moment it sounded like he would break down in tears again. "I started feeling your power. You're so strong, Harry. You could have killed Sirius at any moment you wanted to. I thought I had to protect him, and so I started fighting you more often. I thought you wouldn't want to fight and kill him if you were paying attention to me and trying to kill me."

Harry had to close his eyes. How many sacrifices are there going to be in my family?

"I was more stubborn than ever," said Connor. "Sometimes I was stupid, and sometimes I acted stupid. Sometimes I really believed everything Mum and Sirius told me, and sometimes I didn't. But when I really did, then I was comfortable in what I was doing, and when I didn't, then I thought at least you would hurt me and not Sirius."

"And by then, he must have been possessed." Connor turned his head to stare at Sirius's body. "He was telling me that compulsion had always been a Light gift, except when a Slytherin used it."

Harry bit his lip, thought about not asking, and then decided he had to. If he didn't, then it would linger between them, a poisoned fang like one from the basilisk's mouth, and corrupt everything that followed. There had to be absolute honesty between them, now. "Is that why you tried to compel me in the Owlery?"

Connor nodded. “I couldn’t think of anything else to do. I thought that maybe, just maybe, you would feel sorry for what you did to Mum and reconcile with us, but you didn’t, and by then it was a full month after I heard the prophecy. I was getting frantic. I thought that if I could compel you to become part of the family again, then you wouldn’t have any reason to hurt anybody, not Sirius and not Mum and not me.”

“What did you believe, out of what I said to you that day?” Harry asked.

Connor’s eyes slid away from him.

“Connor?”

“Everything,” Connor whispered. “I believed everything. And I hated it. I thought I would start to hate Mum if I listened to you. I thought I would start to think that you were right and she was wrong. Do you know what it’s like to have your world shatter around you, Harry?”

“Intimately,” said Harry, before he could stop himself.

Connor’s gaze darted towards him, and then dropped away. He gave a small nod to acknowledge Harry’s words. “So I demanded that you come back to us. I told myself I was offering you a chance. And when you refused, I told myself that compulsion was the only choice, even though I knew it wasn’t, because I couldn’t think of anything else to do. It was vernal equinox. The time the prophecy was talking about was just a few weeks away. If I couldn’t convince you, then I thought I could bend you or break you.”

“So you were willing to sacrifice me for Sirius,” Harry summed up.

Connor nodded.

Harry took a deep breath, which felt as though there was anger hanging off the end of it. “I hate that,” he said, finally. “I hate being sacrificed. I don’t mind if I choose to give up my own life or free time, but I hate it that you tried to do it to me, Connor.”

Connor nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

Harry watched him in silence for a few moments, then said, "Go on."

"That failed," said Connor. "So I tried to spread rumors that you were going to murder me, thinking that maybe the Headmaster would have to expel you from school if you were thought to be a dangerous lunatic. But that didn't work. And then you started the lessons, and it seemed as though that was my chance to make you so mad at me that you would never think about Sirius again." He squeezed his eyes shut. "But you kept mentioning Sirius. You kept talking about him. I thought you were taunting me, that you had some plan to get rid of him, and you wanted me to know that there was nothing I could do about it."

"And when I confronted you this afternoon—"

"I thought you'd put a plan in motion," Connor admitted. "I was wrong to compel Draco. I know that now. But I'd rather compel him than lose Sirius." He looked over at Sirius's body and seemed to forget what he was going to say next.

"Draco's the one you're going to have to apologize to about that," Harry reminded him, "not me."

Connor nodded distractedly. His eyes were tearing up again, but he swatted at the corners of them to take the moisture away. "I can't believe he's really gone," he whispered.

Harry held out his arms, and his brother climbed into them again. Harry held him tightly as he cried, and wondered where his own tears had gone. Burned off by exhaustion and pain and the need to concentrate on other things, perhaps.

Connor's second bout of weeping was shorter, and he sat away from Harry, looking a bit embarrassed about it. "Thanks," he whispered. "Harry, I don't even know how to say sorry other than—well, sorry. And I hate that I was trying to protect someone who didn't deserve it, and I hate that Voldemort corrupted me again, like he did last year,

and this time I didn't even know it was him. But I'll do what I can to change things." His face was set and determined.

Harry nodded. "We'll have to talk to lots of people," he said. "We'll have to talk a lot. But I think we can do it."

Connor gave him a tentative smile.

"Harry. Connor."

Harry started. He had actually forgotten that Peter was there, and he hadn't heard the sudden inrush of air that usually accompanied Peter's Animagus transformation. He turned around to see Peter sitting solemnly beside Voldemort's Pensieve. Polaris, Harry was glad to see, was nowhere in sight.

"I'm sorry," said Peter softly. He waved his wand, and Lumos took fire at the tip, lighting up the cabin better than the faint beams of afternoon light still creeping through the boards on the windows. "But there are some things we need to talk about, and we don't have much time to talk about them."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

Peter smiled at him sadly. "I thought you knew the truth already, Harry," he said, "and the phoenix web was just preventing you from viewing it in the right light, or thinking it mattered. It turns out that you don't, that you must not. I saw your face when V-Voldemort said some of the things he did. You still believe the story your parents told you about that night at Godric's Hollow when he attacked. You should have reacted to the things he said differently, now that you're free of the phoenix web, if you knew the truth."

Harry blinked, and felt his heart begin to stutter. He and Snape had suspected, but not known...

"But why not much time?" he whispered.

Peter glanced at the windows of the shack. "I've stayed in one place for too long," he said. "The Dementors will be hunting me. And, more

than that..." He rolled his wand gently between his fingers. "You know the Aurors have spells that will let them see the last round of spells a wand cast?"

Harry nodded, then stopped. Peter smiled gently at him. "You get it," he said.

"But you didn't cast the Avada Kedavra," Harry insisted. "Sirius did. We can tell them that."

"I'm not sure that you would be allowed to," Peter said quietly. "It's still an Unforgivable Curse, Harry, and I'm still a fugitive from Azkaban. I don't think that Dumbledore would let me tell them the truth, either. The phoenix web in my head hasn't moved on the surface in a long time. I think it's sinking deeper. Dumbledore is saving it for something other than my telling you the truth, this time, or I would never have been able to say even this much. But my talking to the Aurors and revealing everything? Yes, I think he was saving it for that. He must have decided that the possible damage to him from that was even greater than the possible damage if I told you about the attack on Godric's Hollow."

His eyes turned flinty, and flashed. "I am never going back to Azkaban. I want to make sure that the two of you know the truth, all of it, and then I'll leave."

"But where will you go?" Harry asked, feeling helpless.

"I don't know yet," said Peter, and then paused with a faint smile. "Well. There is one place I might go and be welcome, though I haven't ever taken advantage of the invitation." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Harry. What matters is you knowing the truth. It's been kept from you for too long."

He dragged Voldemort's Pensieve forward. Harry eyed it warily. "If that contains memories of him possessing Sirius, I don't think we need to see it." He moved sideways until his shoulder bumped his twin's, and felt Connor nod in agreement.

"It doesn't," said Peter softly. "It contains memories of that night. The attack. I think even Voldemort was growing tired of you not knowing the truth, though in his case he intended to take away your magic and then make you despair of what you saw in here."

He glanced at both of them. "Ready?"

Harry knew a fine tremor was shaking Connor, and knew his brother was not ready. But it wouldn't get any easier if they waited—and if what Peter said was true, they couldn't wait. He held Connor's hand and nodded.

Peter bent down towards the silvery liquid. Harry followed, shuddering slightly as the coolness crept over him, but he didn't duck fully beneath the surface until he had made sure that Connor was following him. He wasn't going to see his brother left behind again. This time, they would face whatever shattering truths might be waiting together.

They landed in the middle of a place that it took Harry a moment to recognize as Godric's Hollow. For one thing, it was night, without a moon, thanks to the rushing clouds overhead. For another, the house looked different. And for a third, the gleam of the isolation wards that had protected their home for as long as he could remember was gone. He shivered. They must be seeing the moment in which Voldemort had breached the wards. The Fidelius Charm was already broken.

A dark-cloaked shape moved on the lawn, striding rapidly towards the doors. Harry shuddered. Even in the memory, he could feel the power that traveled with Voldemort. It was stronger than it had been when he faced Voldemort as Quirrell, or Tom Riddle, or this latest version of him. Harry shook his head. How could Dumbledore have thought a baby would survive an attack by a wizard that powerful?

"There I am," said Peter, pointing out a plump figure, low to the ground, scurrying behind the Dark Lord. "I can tell you what happens afterwards. This memory only goes to the point when Voldemort was destroyed, of course."

Harry glanced at Connor. His brother's jaw gaped open, and he shook his head slowly back and forth, as if he were trying to envision some way of dealing with this. When he saw Harry watching him, he slammed his jaw shut and tried to lift his head high, though his face was working with violent emotions. Harry took his hand, and they walked into the house behind Voldemort and Peter.

Voldemort glanced around the empty house and laughed, the same high, cold laugh Harry had learned to associate with his enemy in other incarnations. "Where are the children, Wormtail?"

"Up-upstairs, my I-lord." Harry hardly recognized Peter's voice. It was a broken, obsequious stammer. Harry wondered if it was an act, if Peter had always been this strong man who waited beside them now with a solemn expression on his face, or if his fear of Voldemort had prompted fear in truth.

Voldemort crossed to the stairs and began to climb them. Harry, Connor, and Peter followed behind, shivering. The memory-Peter scuttled even behind them, as if he did not want to witness what was about to happen.

Well, come to that, Harry thought, I don't, either. Suspicion made his heart knock heavily in his chest, and his breath came short, as if he were backing up to another cliff of the kind that Draco and Snape had shoved him off in Malfoy Manor.

They reached a bedroom door that looked substantially different from the one that Harry knew. Voldemort studied it for a moment, then laughed again and moved his wand twice. One muttered spell broke the wards on the door, and another shattered it entirely. Harry heard bedclothes rustle in the aftermath of that shattering, and then an unhappy, wailing cry.

Voldemort stepped through the door. The memory-Peter peered over his shoulder. Now-Peter motioned, and Harry and Connor stepped around Voldemort so that they could see better.

Two young boys lay in twin cots a good distance back from the door, under a high, peaked roof. Harry was startled to see how much alike

they looked. Of course, we didn't have the scars then, he thought, and we're squinting so hard that you can't really see our eyes.

Voldemort was still a moment; when Harry looked at his face, he saw red eyes narrowed. "Wormtail!" he said abruptly.

Memory-Peter flinched and scurried up to his side. "My lord?"

"You are sure that you know no more of the prophecy?" Voldemort asked. "You are sure that you do not know for certain which child will defeat me?"

Memory-Peter shook his head. Harry found himself beyond impressed. Somehow, Peter had broken in just the right ways to convince Voldemort that he knew where his friends were living and was willing to betray them, but not enough to reveal that he also knew the prophecy that said the younger of the two twins would be the one to defeat him. "No, my lord. Only what S-Severus told you."

Voldemort nodded. "Best to take care of them all at once, then," he murmured. "By now, Bellatrix should have destroyed the other candidate." He held his wand high. "Avada Kedavra!"

The bolt of green light shot forth—

And towards Harry's cot.

Harry found himself staggering backward and sitting down, hard, as the light struck him in the forehead, as Voldemort turned and sent another bolt of green light at Connor—

And a deep, shattering roar filled the room, accompanied by the familiar feeling of magic boiling over, and green light inundated Harry's vision, and Voldemort screamed and screamed and screamed, and cold, powerful magic claimed a victim—

And then they were back outside the Pensieve, sprawled on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Harry, shaking, buried his head in his hands. Sometime along the route, he had let go of Connor's wrist. He could hear his brother's soft sobs, aching noises of disbelief and confusion.

"That was what happened," Peter whispered. "I was behind the Dark Lord, and I could see. He cast the Killing Curse at you, Harry, then turned and cast it at your brother. While the green light still bound him and Connor, your reflected Killing Curse struck him. I've never seen anything like it. I suppose that was because Voldemort had taken so many protections against losing his own life, trying to gain immortality, and the curse had to fight that as well as actually kill him. It struggled with him before it pulled him from his body, and the light that bound him and Connor flickered out. Then it reduced his body to ash. His spirit fled, of course," Peter added, a deep, bitter sound in his voice. "I know that now."

"I don't understand," Connor whispered. Harry managed to lift his head and look at his brother, whose face was not only pale, but streaming with tears. "If Harry reflected the Killing Curse back at Voldemort, does that mean he's the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Peter shook his head slowly. "He's the one who killed Voldemort with a reflected Killing Curse, yes," he said, and gestured at Harry's forehead. "That scar is a curse scar. But yours is as well, Connor. Voldemort was busy trying to kill you when Harry hit him. I think the second Avada Kedavra had a chance to leave a mark on you, but nothing else. It got interrupted in the middle."

Connor blinked and swallowed and swiped at his forehead. "But—I don't understand. Mum and Dumbledore would have been able to tell that Harry's scar was a curse scar. Why didn't they think he was the Boy-Who-Lived, too?"

Nearly numb with shock, Harry saw Peter's face harden. "Ah," he said. "That's to do with the part that I don't think even Dumbledore knows I saw.

"After I ran, I came back. I had nowhere else to go, not that night, though I was meant to be found and go to Azkaban the next morning.

And I have to admit, I was curious. I didn't know what I'd expected when I went into the house at Godric's Hollow, but that wasn't it.

"I came back, and crouched outside the window. That house was half-destroyed," he added to Harry. "That's why they had to rebuild it. I saw your parents and Dumbledore come back and run to the nursery. They came down the stairs with both of you in their arms, your foreheads bleeding. You were both crying." Peter spoke with his eyes fixed on the distance, as if that would make the memory easier to bear.

"Lily used a healing spell, and I heard them gasp when the spell finished. The blood had cleared, but left behind scars.

"Understand," Peter said, "that wasn't supposed to happen. The prophecy said there would be one savior, clearly marked."

"Can you recite the prophecy?" Harry asked. His voice was flat and hoarse, and did not sound as if it belonged to him.

Peter nodded, then closed his eyes and began to chant. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...He is the younger of two, and he shall have the power the Dark Lord knows not...For the elder is power, but the younger is power united with love...O guard him, O shield him, for the darkness through which he passes otherwise is vicious and hideous, and love has but a scant chance of surviving...The elder will stand at his right shoulder, loving him, but the younger will love the whole of the wizarding world...The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, and in so doing mark his heart... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born as the seventh month dies..."

His voice faded, and Harry stared at the wall, and tried to think. Thoughts chased themselves in small pieces around his whirling mind, assaulting him and then flicking away again before he could fully grasp them.

It seemed as though Dumbledore and his parents had interpreted the prophecy correctly. Connor was born at the end of July. He was the

younger of the two of them. Lily had always said that Connor's power was love, and that Harry needed to guard him, because otherwise that love would perish. Harry's love for Connor was deeper and truer than any other he felt—

Or had been.

Harry shoved that thought away, and went back to concentrating.

Connor's scar was in the shape of a heart. Yes, everything fit. Or everything should have fit. Harry didn't know how to explain the memory in the Pensieve.

He shook his head, finally, and turned back to Peter, deciding that he couldn't possibly know the truth with the information he had right now. "And what did Dumbledore and our parents do?"

"I heard them speaking," said Peter softly. "I will not forget what they said, not until I die. I certainly had enough time to remember their words in Azkaban."

"Lily said, 'This wasn't supposed to happen. Albus, what happened? Why do they both have scars? And why does Harry's magic feel like—like that? It's unnatural.' She started to cry."

Peter darted a swift glance at Harry. "You'd always been a magically normal baby, Harry—strong, but well within the bounds of normality. Until Voldemort came. Lying in Lily's arms that night, you would have been a beacon, or a siren, to anyone who wanted to look or listen. I was having a hard time restraining myself from going into the house, just to be nearer the magic."

"Dumbledore sighed. It was a sigh that seemed to come from his bones. 'Lily, James,' he said. 'What I am telling you must not go beyond the walls of this house. Voldemort used the Killing Curse on both boys. He must have used it on Harry after he used it on Connor, or Harry would not be alive, but the fact remains that he used it. And the curse broke a barrier in Harry that all normal wizards have. He has access to a level of power that most wizards can't use, because calling on that much magic at once would kill them.'

“Then why is he still alive?” It was James who asked that. I’ll never forget how he looked, Harry, holding you. Small and fragile, and helpless. It was the first time I ever saw James look that way.

“Because,’ said Dumbledore, and pinched the bridge of his nose, ‘he is a child, and he can grow used to using that level of power in a way that he could not if he were older. His body is still flexible enough to accept the change. Even if he were four or five, I do not believe he would have survived the breaking of his barriers.’ He hesitated for a long time, looking down at you, Harry.

“Then he said, ‘And Voldemort has transferred a good portion of his powers to him. That accounts for the rest of his strength, and the unnaturalness that you sense, Lily. I felt it as we climbed the stairs. There should still have been much ambient magic left in the air, enough that I could have cast a spell to see what happened in that room, what the walls remembered. Instead, there was almost none, except that which emanated from Harry himself. He has Voldemort’s ability to feed on magic. Once he had the ability, he ate Voldemort’s remaining power, including whatever was left of the two Killing Curses Voldemort must have used.”

Harry bowed his head, and tried to keep his breathing deeper than it wanted to be. He felt Connor take his hand. He squeezed desperately. His brother winced, but squeezed back.

“That is why they think your magic unnatural, Harry,” Peter whispered. “Not only did V-Voldemort open your barriers and give you access to more magic than you should have had, he gifted you with a good deal of Dark power. In essence, he made you his magical heir, the way some pureblood families do when they transfer powers from parents to children at the moment of death. You have abilities that he does, because he had them when he attacked you that night, not because you were born with them.” Peter gave a dusty little laugh. “You know, things would have turned out differently if you or Voldemort were just a little weaker. If you were, then you couldn’t have survived the Killing Curse for the moment it took to smash the barriers and let your deeper magic out. If he was, then he wouldn’t have had the strength to smash the barriers at all, or leave his magic behind for you to

swallow. You would simply have died, or he would have died and taken all his power with him. Instead, he made you the most formidable enemy he possibly could have."

Harry made himself breathe. Deep breaths. I am not going to panic. I am not going to panic. I will not let myself panic.

He lifted his head. "What did Dumbledore say then?"

"Nothing immediately," said Peter softly. "Your parents were crying by then. And then—well, then Sirius and Remus came in, and Dumbledore didn't trust them enough to reveal his full plan in front of them. He told Sirius and Remus that Connor had been marked by the prophecy, just as they suspected, and sent them away with him and James to try and make the curse scar stop bleeding, since it had broken open again. That left him with Lily and you, Harry."

"He told Lily, 'You must make sure that he loves his brother, that he is his guardian, that all that immense power is trained and bent to a good purpose. You know that otherwise, the prophecy may shift. We cannot afford to have the next Dark Lord, someone with unnatural magic, as our only savior from Voldemort. Harry must be the elder, and Connor must be the younger.'"

Harry tried to speak. He had no saliva left in his throat. He was grateful when Connor murmured, "I don't understand. Surely I'm the younger, and Harry the elder?"

Harry opened his eyes far enough to see the savage look on Peter's face.

"Prophecies are the wildest form of Divination magic," he breathed. "Prophecies can shift."

Harry felt the words touch a spring in his memory. His mother's words last year, just after the phoenix web had been tripped and Remus had found out about it, came back to him.

"But prophecies are the wildest form of Divination magic...There's a chance that it might mean different things. It would still come true, but

it could turn out meaning something different from what it seemed to say the night it was made...And we had to do everything we could to lock you into that role, to sculpt you that way, so that the prophecy couldn't possibly wander off and mean someone else, someone we wouldn't know in time to protect, someone that Voldemort could perhaps kill. Everything in the prophecy had to come true. You had to love Connor, and before everything else. We couldn't take the chance that it would be otherwise. Do you understand?"

Harry had half-forgotten the words, but they slammed home to him now. Lily had told him the truth then, though he had been too stupefied by pain and exhaustion and his commitment to obedience to see it.

"The prophecy could have meant someone else," he whispered.

Peter nodded, slowly. "It could have, indeed. That's why Voldemort sent the Lestranges to attack the Longbottoms, because their son Neville was also born at the end of July, and it could also have been him. If Voldemort had gone along in Bellatrix's place or with her, if Voldemort had marked him..." Peter spread his hands.

"But the prophecy says that the one with the power to defy the Dark Lord is the younger of two," said Connor. "I don't understand."

"The younger of two," Peter pointed out. "It says nothing about the younger of two brothers, or the younger of two twins. It doesn't even say that both people in the prophecy need to have been born at the end of July."

Harry buried his head in his hands.

So many things in my life have been a lie.

"A prophecy always comes true," said Peter softly. "But we usually can't know how or why beforehand. It can shift in midair. It can take the likeliest person. Human choice works to influence it, though, if we understand it enough, and we can try to make the prophecy more certain. Its very wildness grants us a little more free will."

"Dumbledore knew he could convince Lily to sacrifice one of her sons. He wasn't sure about anyone else. And he wanted to be sure. More than anything in the world, Dumbledore fears uncertainty. He fears waking up one day to find that the wizarding world he's labored to save for a century has exploded around his ears. If he had control of the savior, then he had the assurance that tomorrow would be pretty much like today, that the future would be pretty much like the past.

"So he influenced Voldemort as much as he could, to try and insure that the Dark Lord would mark Connor his equal." Peter took a deep breath. "And he influenced us, too. He focused on me, played on my love of my friends, to insure that I would agree to break the Fidelius Charm and make your parents a more tempting target than the Longbottoms. He performed the Soul Strength Spell to show your parents that you were the one who had to play guardian, Harry—"

"You can't perform that on an infant," Harry cut in, his voice tight. His eyes burned. He felt as though the walls of the shack had been torn away and they stood on an open plain, under black stars.

Peter looked startled for only a moment. Then he nodded, his face tightening. "So he lied to us, then. He nudged the prophecy along. And I think he thought everything was going smoothly up until the point when he realized you had more power, Harry. If you were the savior the prophecy mentioned, the one with the power Voldemort knew not, then that meant the elder, the one who would stand at your right shoulder and love you, was still somewhere else—somewhere out of his control. He wouldn't have a clue who it was. He could not stand that.

"So he told Lily to sculpt you and train you to love Connor. If you were his guardian, if you loved only him, then you would be the best candidate for at least two lines of the prophecy—the one that said Connor needed to be shielded, and the one that said the elder would love the younger. That made the prophecy all the more unlikely to shift, and to choose Connor as its savior instead. And, of course, it made you extremely unlikely to use your power for any other purpose than protecting your brother."

Harry sat there. The dark stars were wheeling above him now, cutting across the sky in black streaks.

He heard Connor ask, his voice soft and timid, “What does that mean, then?”

“It means that we’re up in the air,” said Peter. “We were from the moment Harry broke his phoenix web, I think. Dumbledore could no longer trust that he would only love you. His power is free, and he might be the one the prophecy will choose. On the other hand, perhaps it will choose you, and Harry will be the elder who has to love you. Or the elder could be someone else who loves you. Or the younger will be Harry, and his elder someone else. Since you both do bear marks from the Dark Lord, then I think the choices have narrowed, and it can’t really be anyone but one of the two of you. But Dumbledore’s neat plans are all smashed.” There was a vicious glee in Peter’s voice that Harry thought he couldn’t really blame him for.

Harry sat in silence for a moment. He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, was falling if he thought too much about it—

And then he grasped himself, and yanked himself forward.

What is this? Living in fear of change? What, do you want to be like Dumbledore and your mother?

This doesn’t change everything. It means that you could be the Boy-Who-Lived, and you’ll have to think about that. But it also means that Connor could be the Boy-Who-Lived, and he’ll need your help and your training. He’s not power united with love right now; he’s not anything like it. The world might need him, and he would falter.

It’s not over. It’s not anything like over. Both of you were wronged. Both of you might be needed, or at least one. Now, stand up and do something about it.

Harry shifted towards Connor. Connor, his face pale and his eyes seemingly permanently wide, stared at him.

"I couldn't blame you if you hated me," he whispered. "They made you give up your life for me."

"They're to blame," said Harry. "Not you. I won't let you go live with Lily again, Connor."

Connor considered him, then dipped his head once. "And what else are we going to do?" he asked.

"I am going to help you learn," said Harry, startled by the steel in his own voice. "Voldemort's not going to get us. He's never going to kill either one of us. And I refuse to live in fear of what might happen. We're going to make things happen. We're going to have our own freedom, which should have happened all along. We're going to fucking fight." He held out his hand.

Connor took a deep breath, and clasped it.

Harry thought he heard Peter utter a long sigh, half of surprise, half of soul-deep relief. Harry braced himself for how his head would ache when he stood, then stood, and clasped Connor's hand more firmly.

"Let's get out of here," he said softly, and turned towards the door, and the future that waited beyond it.

Chapter Forty-Two: Stand or Fall

Harry froze as he reached the end of the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. He heard Connor make an inquiring noise behind him, but he didn't move, instead staring forward and reaching out as much as he could with his dulled senses. They throbbed with magical exhaustion, and he couldn't be sure that what he felt was really there.

"What is it, Harry?" Peter asked from behind Connor.

Harry shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he whispered.

I do, said the voice in his head, abruptly returning from wherever it had been. Bad things.

How do you know? Harry thought back, continuing to strain his senses. He still heard nothing, but enemies didn't have to make noise to be dangerous. That was one of the first things his mother had taught him.

I know pain, said the voice simply. And there's pain waiting for us outside this tree. It took on a whining tone. There's always pain. Why is there always pain? I don't like it. I can't escape it. And you can't escape it. Why can't it just go away?

Harry sighed and banished the voice to the back of his head, seeing he would get no help from it. He went on listening, since he could see nothing but the usual calm evening in front of him, and hear nothing but the whisper of wind in the grass, and smell or taste or feel nothing out of the ordinary.

"Fuck," said Peter abruptly.

Harry turned to look back at him. "What is it?" He would trust Peter's senses more than his own right now, and Peter was a better wizard than Connor, and trained in recognizing Dark magic besides.

"The air," Peter whispered. "Doesn't it feel heavy to you?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know." He had to lean against the side of the tunnel just to keep on his feet. He hoped neither Connor nor Peter could see that, since they would probably insist on him going to sleep the moment they saw it, perhaps even carrying him back to the school. Harry didn't think it a wise decision. If there was evil here, then he had to be ready to meet it.

Peter smiled, but the smile was strained. "I've only felt it this heavy once before," he said, still in a whisper. "When I went into Godric's Hollow behind V-Voldemort. There's a prophecy getting ready to come true, Harry. Damn it."

Harry closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Now that he concentrated, he thought he could feel it, a weight in the air that slid down his face like melted marmalade. He shuddered and opened his eyes again.

"Well," he said, his voice hoarse with what he hoped they would think was anger and not weariness, "we still have to leave this tree. You said that the Aurors aren't going to give you time to explain, Peter, and running into Dumbledore would be even worse." He shuddered to think of what Dumbledore would say about the knowledge he and Connor now possessed.

"Yes, we've got to leave," Connor agreed. "Harry needs to get to the hospital wing."

Harry looked at him sharply. His brother gave him an irritated glance back. "What?" he asked. "Anyone can see that you need to rest, Harry. You're not doing a good job of hiding it."

Harry shuffled from foot to foot, muttered in his throat, and looked to the entrance. Still nothing moved beyond it, and Harry heard no voices, raised in either laughter or threat. He thought they should be able to get back to Hogwarts relatively unobserved; most people would be at dinner, and he hoped that Snape would still be stunned by whatever pain the voice in his head had shared with him.

He tried to think about the second half of the prophecy, but the words warped and blurred and slid away from him. All Harry really wanted was to go put his head down on something soft and close his eyes.

He took a deep breath “Let’s go, then,” he said, and stepped out of the way, so that Connor could duck past him and press the knot in the Willow’s trunk to calm it. Peter took Harry’s arm and helped him up the slight slope out. Harry accepted the hold, grudgingly, since it was obvious that Peter wouldn’t let him simply walk out on his own.

And, damn it, he was tired, even though he couldn’t afford to be. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, and told himself it would be better when he reached Hogwarts and had some healing potions.

And then the late sun darkened, and the air turned cold, and Dementors were everywhere, turning the world gray.

Peter let out a faint scream, overwhelmed by the presence of so many of them, and crumpled to the ground. Harry shouted, but it was a faint and strangled sound. Connor didn’t cry out at all, though his eyes grew wider and wider in his increasingly pale face.

A dark figure floated towards Peter, drawing its hood back from its face. Harry saw the yawning, distended mouth, and knew the thing was about to try and suck Peter’s soul out in the Kiss.

“No, damn it!” he managed. “Where is your leader? The gray one?” He let his magic flare around him, calling the Dementors’ attention. “I spoke with him once before. He released my magic. I want to know where he is!”

Here, vates.

Harry shivered as he felt the voice drill into his head, like ice spikes through his ears. It hurt less this time than it had, though. He wondered why.

I am keeping it out, said the voice in the back of his head. This is my territory. I don’t want to share it with any more pain, thank you.

Harry blinked and nodded shortly, then forced himself to his feet as the Dementors parted like a thunderhead and let the gray one glide down an aisle in the middle of them. Harry felt its freezing not-gaze, and flinched. His thoughts and eyes were still trying to slide sideways. He could sleep later, he told himself. He didn't have time to be exhausted right now.

It didn't seem to be working. As far as his body was concerned, the plea that Harry had used to such good effect when he was dashing out of Hogwarts and rescuing Connor was so much air. He had done his part, rescued Connor and defeated Voldemort and seen the truth and resolved to struggle in the future. Now he needed to rest.

Not yet, Harry thought, and used some of the stolen magic that he had gotten from Voldemort to stiffen his legs and spine. He grimaced. It felt as though raw shit was pouring through his veins when he did that, but it did what was supposed to do, and kept him upright as the gray Dementor floated to a halt in front of him. The one hovering above Peter hadn't moved, but Harry was grateful to see that it hadn't stooped and sucked out Peter's soul, either.

You are among us again, vates. The gray Dementor's voice was thick in his head, like condensation, like fog—or maybe it was just that combining with his tiredness. And your magic is free, and so are your thoughts. You have learned of your duties and the path of choice. Will you choose to free us?

Harry blinked. That did not sound like such a horrible price. Why had the Dementors come up as if they were attacking, then?

Probably because they wanted Peter, he thought, his gaze sliding sideways to the motionless wizard. And the black ones don't seem to be as smart as their leader.

He looked back at the gray Dementor. "You're bound like all the other magical creatures, aren't you?" he asked.

The gray Dementor inclined its head. We want to be free, vates.

And then, just as Harry supposed Dementors could pour despair into the victims of Azkaban, the gray leader poured longing into him. Harry could feel the clinging chains of the web that the Dementors labored under, how they longed to rest and reproduce and feed and live as normal magical creatures would, but how they could not do that until the chain was removed.

They enslave us, the gray Dementor said, its voice causing a faint rime of ice to form on Harry's face. We cannot breed, vates. There will never be more of us until the chains are removed. There have not been more of us in centuries. And we cannot eat, not truly eat, and we cannot sleep. We cannot dream. Can you imagine what it would be like, never to dream, vates?

Harry's first thought was, It would be heaven, and he found himself wanting to giggle as if he were drunk. But he restrained himself. Just because his dreams were usually nightmares induced by Voldemort didn't mean that the dreams of all creatures were like that.

And he could certainly understand the plea for rest right now. And to be free of a certain weary, bothersome, burdensome duty that hounded him, or rested on his shoulders. The Dementors, all of them, had been chained to Azkaban for centuries, guarding human prisoners. It was no existence for magical creatures.

That was horrible, what the wizards did to you, he thought dimly, but the gray Dementor picked up on it and inclined its head.

We have helped you, vates. We freed you under the hope that someday we would be free ourselves. And now that time has come.

Harry considered that, as clearly as he could in his current state. It seemed reasonable to him. Why not? The Dementors had freed him, and certainly they deserved to be free. And they seemed to be as good a candidate for the fulfillment of the prophecy as any other. The gray one was before him. He had even thought the line in the prophecy might mean the gray Dementor when he was traveling through time with Hermione. And what was the line about his decision this evening setting the path for them all? That must mean that his first action as vates, to free the Dementors, would mean setting the

precedent to free other creatures from their magical nets. Harry remembered how wonderful he had felt when freed from the phoenix web. Surely it could not be a bad thing, for others to feel that surge of joy and completion.

Can you show me the web? he asked the gray Dementor, not without embarrassment. I'm not feeling as well as I should be right now, and I'm afraid that I can't see it on my own.

The Dementor gestured once, and a glowing ice-blue web sprang into being, writhing among the Dementors and trailing away into the distance. Harry studied it for a moment. There are other Dementors still at Azkaban?

The gray head inclined.

Harry blinked. Well, he thought it would be hard, but not too hard. The web was large, yes, and ancient, but also clumsily stitched. The wizards who wove it had done nothing more than cast the ice-blue coils of the incantation around each Dementor's core, the thrumming black thing at the center of all of them. It was impossible for the Dementors to remove, of course, without tearing themselves apart, and most wizards wouldn't have the power or inclination to touch it, but it required only raw strength to shred the web itself, and leave everything that was not it untouched.

Harry started to reach out, concentrating on marshaling the stolen power, even the filthy Dark magic. He could find a good use for it.

Then he paused. There was something he was forgetting. What was it?

The prophecy? No, as much as he could understand the prophecy, Harry was sure he understood it.

Peter? No, the black Dementors had not touched him, and though Connor looked on the edge of fainting, they had not touched him, either. They were waiting patiently for their freedom, eyeless not-gazes fixed on him.

A part of his task as vates?

Yes.

Harry abruptly shuddered and lowered his hand and his magic. He swallowed thickly a few times, trying to push the horrified insight in his brain into words. He felt the gray Dementor's cold curiosity, and the voice in the back of his head whispered, Are you sure you should be doing this, when they're right there?

Shock had cleared Harry's head for a moment, though, and he knew this was the right thing to do.

He looked up and studied the gray Dementor. "You said," he managed, and paused. Merlin, I want to go to bed. He told himself to stop whining like a child and act like a vates. "You said that if you were free, you would dream and reproduce and feed. What did you mean, feed? Who are you going to eat?"

The Dementors went motionless. Harry knew they really couldn't have, since after all their robes were still drifting in the wind, and some of them were shifting around near the back of their crowd, but he felt as if it had happened, anyway. His heart knocked against his ribs, and adrenaline rose to chase away the blurriness. He stood a little straighter.

Connor whispered, "If they were free, wouldn't they just Kiss everyone, not only the Azkaban prisoners?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Harry whispered back. "Hush."

The gray Dementor waited long moments before it spoke. Harry wondered if that was because it had to consider its words so carefully, or whether it had hoped to use the pause to impress him or wear him down. If the latter was the intention, it didn't work. Harry only felt more and more tense as the moments passed. He could feel his head lifting, his nostrils flaring, his eyes narrowing. He was trained for battle, and he knew there might be another battle coming.

His childish side tried to wail a protest at that. Harry squashed it without much effort. He had known when he trained that there might come days with more than one battle—in fact, a running skirmish would be more usual than one enormous battle in a day, and no more. He had to keep moving, had to call up energy multiple times, had to be ready to face whatever appeared.

The gray Dementor said, We would feed as we always have, on happy memories and sometimes souls. The Kiss is necessary for us to breed.

“But you would feed on whoever you wanted?” Harry asked. “Not only criminals condemned to Azkaban?”

We would no longer be bound by wizarding notions of morality.

“So you would feed on whoever you wished?”

We would confine our hunting mostly to the Muggle world. They cannot see us. They would not hunt us. They would not know what killed them. We would be willing to leave your family and friends alone, vates.

Harry closed his eyes. Yes, this was the part of the vates name that he almost forgotten. He was responsible for his decisions, all of them, both the good and the bad ones. If he made one, then he had to know why he had made it, how it would affect his future decisions—and what consequences it would mean for others.

“How can I let you go free, when you will destroy others and leave soulless bodies behind you?” he whispered.

Think of it as justice, vates, the gray Dementor suggested. Your kind has held us prisoner for centuries. We will only be visiting on them the same terror and frustration they have visited on us.

“That’s vengeance, not justice,” Harry said.

The Dementors stirred around him like a trembling candle flame. The gray Dementor said, And is it justice to leave us confined in the web?

A true vates cannot abide compulsion, neither for himself nor for anyone else. If you are not a true vates, perhaps we have made a mistake, and we then owe you nothing, neither obedience nor safety.

"You wouldn't owe me obedience anyway," Harry muttered, but he was thinking hard. Was there some way that he could free the Dementors and insure that they didn't feed on anyone else? He could see why those ancient wizards had taken the compromise of binding the Dementors to Azkaban. Those they fed on were already considered guilty, not worthy of protection from the Dementors, unlike the innocents outside the prison.

I cannot destroy them. That would be against their will. I cannot Transfigure them into something that does not need to feed on souls or memories. That would be immoral, when they are intelligent and know the world around them.

Harry clenched his fists, spitted for the first time by one of the thorns on his path, and hating it.

And I cannot leave them bound.

And, just to add to everything, the prophecy said that his first decision as vates would set the path for them all. And he was so tired that he could barely think straight, and growing in the back of his mind was the increasingly urgent need to get Connor and Peter away from the Dementors.

No pressure, of course.

Harry swallowed. Well, when in doubt, turn to the source. Perhaps the Dementors themselves could give him some idea of what they might do, what bargains they would be willing to enter, so that freeing them would not linger so heavily on his conscience. Their offer to hunt in the Muggle world and spare his friends and family was unacceptable.

He lifted his head and stared at the gray Dementor. "I cannot free you without others suffering," he said. "Can you think of any way that you could be free and not cause others suffering?"

The gray Dementor did not speak for long moments, but eddied from side to side. Harry watched, and held his breath, and waited.

Then the gray Dementor said, Is this something that you will ask of all the bound magical creatures, vates?

"Probably not," said Harry. "Some of the bound creatures, like the unicorns, probably won't cause others to hurt when they're free. But the others—" He shrugged. "Yes."

It is a restriction of our free will.

"It is not," Harry pointed out. "I asked you what you're willing to do. If you enter into a bargain like this because you say you want to, then that's not a restriction of anything. You'll have chosen."

Even choice is a restriction.

Harry folded his arms. "You're not the whole of the wizarding world," he said, surprised for a moment by the irritation in his tone. Then he remembered that he had sounded this way as a six-year-old when he'd stayed up too late. The recollection almost made him smile, but the gray Dementor was there, and Harry was not sure how it would interpret the gesture. He kept his face blank. "You're not more important than anyone else. You're just as important as the wizards, and the house elves, and the unicorns, and not more important." He shook his head slightly when he realized he'd repeated that sentiment twice. Fatigue was affecting his eloquence. "I can't free you if it would hurt everyone else."

The gray Dementor was silent for long moments. Then it said, We came from nightmares, long ago, from the dark shadows that lurk at the edge of human souls. It is why we can feed on happy memories, and on souls themselves. We were called out, and lived in the daylit world, and did not want to return to nightmares. But, if need be, we could go back. We could live in that half-world, that dream-world, taking our food from human minds just like any other breed of nightmares.

Harry frowned uneasily. "That would mean you were still hurting people, wouldn't it?"

And would you stop every bad dream in the world, vates? For the first time, the gray Dementor sounded amused with him.

"If I could. Yes."

There was silence, and then the gray Dementor said, in tones of wonder, Yes, I do believe you would. It went on before Harry could spend much of his time being surprised about a Dementor experiencing wonder. You could consider yourself setting right the balance of nature and magic in sending us back. We were called into the open by a wizard who wished to use us against his enemies, and we adapted to the night. I am the only one still of the twilight, the only one who still remembers that we came from the dream-world. Yes, vates, send us back. Send us home.

"Do I have your word that you'll go to the dream-world and nowhere else if I release your web, then?" Harry demanded.

You have my word, and the others answer to me, vates.

Harry let his breath out in a deep wash. "Very well," he said, and then reached out and broke the ice-blue web with a twist of his power.

It was actually a good thing that he was so tired, or he might not have done it the right way. The web was too thick to be cut, too sticky to be freed one Dementor at a time. Harry just grabbed it and yanked it away from the gray Dementor, flushing out his tainted, stolen magic in a flood over it, and the web dissolved and rotted away. It was gone from every other Dementor in sight the moment it was gone from the gray one.

Harry was aware of the Dementors' oppressive aura increasing. There was no longer any barrier between him and the fear. But he stood straight under it, and looked at the gray one.

He had kept his part of the promise. It was up to them to keep theirs.

The gray Dementor held its arms wide and began to whirl. The others were swept towards it like leaves in a windstorm. The gray Dementor spun them all into a rotting, dark web of its own, and then into a funnel cloud with itself at the bottom. Harry saw it rise, soaring straight up the middle of the funnel. Ahead of it, the sky ripped open, but Harry saw no twilight-marked clouds or stars. Instead, he was staring at a sky the color of rotting muscle, a sky that it seemed he had seen in some of his nightmares.

Goodbye, vates.

The sky closed with a thunderclap behind them, and Harry and Connor stood alone on the grass, beside a just-barely-stirring Peter.

Peter sat up and stared at Harry.

"I don't think they'll be bothering you any more, at least," Harry muttered, swaying on his feet. He blinked, then added, "And I think you should go, before someone sees you with us and Dumbledore calls the Aurors."

Peter did not move for long moments, despite his earlier urgency. His eyes scanned Harry intently for a moment, and then he nodded, his teeth flashing briefly in a fierce, feral grin.

"The next few years should be interesting," he muttered, as he stood.

Harry gave him what he knew was a faint smile. He hoped Peter would understand that the faintness came from his weariness, and not his lack of sincere emotion. "Goodbye, Peter. I hope that you have a safe journey. Write to me to let me know you're safe."

Peter nodded once. "I am sure I will, Harry. I do not want to lose contact with you. You have done so much for me."

Tired or no, Harry couldn't let that one pass. "You did a lot for me, too," he protested.

"Not as much, I think." Peter only shook his head when Harry would have argued, and held out a hand. Harry clasped it.

Peter turned and looked hesitantly at Connor. Connor stared back at him. Harry could read nothing on his brother's face at all.

"Goodbye, Connor," said Peter. "I am sorry about Sirius. He was my friend, once."

"I know," said Connor softly. "It wasn't your fault." He hesitated, then added, "Goodbye."

Peter nodded, and made the nod into part of the motion that carried him into his Animagus form. He scurried towards the Forbidden Forest, barely a movement in the thick grass, and quickly vanished. Harry found himself hoping absently that none of the rat-eating creatures in the Forest would be abroad tonight.

"What are we going to do now?" Connor asked, when a few moments had passed in silence.

Harry blinked, and came back to himself. He really was stupefied, he thought, if he'd just stood there and stared at nothing. "We go inside," he said firmly. "We find Snape. We get him to do...things with Sirius's body, and Voldemort's Pensieve, and that damn knife." Peter had retrieved his wand as they left the Shrieking Shack, a fact for which Harry was profoundly grateful. "And then we get Madam Pomfrey to check us both over." He glanced at his brother, searching for the signs of blood for the first time. "Did Voldemort hurt you?"

"A few cuts, that's all," said Connor. "Nothing like as bad as you got." But he seemed distracted, glancing around. "Harry," he said slowly. "That heaviness is still in the air."

Harry rubbed his cheek. "What heaviness?" Merlin, he was slow tonight. He knew, vaguely, that he had changed the world by freeing the Dementors, but he could not seem to care.

"The one that means a prophecy is coming true," said Connor. "It's still here." He turned to Harry, his eyes appealing. "I thought it was supposed to be done with? I thought freeing the Dementors was what the lines about the gray one and the decision were about?"

“What about the second half of the second half?” Harry found himself dropping to one knee in the grass. It would be soft enough to rest in, wouldn’t it? Connor could run and fetch Snape by himself, couldn’t he? Snape could get the information from Connor’s mind himself, with Legilimency, if Connor couldn’t tell him. That sounded like a wonderful idea, since it would allow Harry to rest.

Connor drew breath to answer, but his words were drowned by a furious voice.

“Harry!”

Harry lifted his head, and blinked drowsily as a black-clad figure swept towards them. “Oh, good,” he said. “Snape’s here. We don’t have to find him.”

Connor made a small squeaking sound of distress, but didn’t get a chance to run away before Snape was upon them. Snape speared Connor with a glance, then turned to Harry and said, “I see that you have once again come back exhausted and half-dead from a mission to rescue your brother that you should have left up to older and more experienced wizards.”

“Shut it, Snape,” Harry muttered, hardly registering what he was saying. “Sirius is dead, and it wasn’t Peter, and we defeated Voldemort again. I think I deserve a nap before you start yelling at me.” He curled up on his side and closed his eyes.

Of course, he hadn’t even fallen properly asleep before the vision of a circle of dark figures closing flashed behind his eyes, and he jerked himself up, gasping as a sharp pain cut into his side. Snape crouched down beside him, running his fingers over his ribs and hissing under his breath.

“You’ve sustained several nasty injuries, Harry,” he murmured.
“What—“

Harry turned his head blindly back and forth, closing his eyes, until the vision of the circle of shadows aligned with a particular direction.

When he opened his eyes again, he was staring straight across the lake.

He breathed, "There," at the same moment as Snape swung his head and snarled, "The anti-Apparition wards are down!"

"And only the members of the Order of the Phoenix know how to disable them," said Harry. He was barely conscious again, but he knew this was important. "And Voldemort controlled Sirius's mind for the past several months, and had his memories. He could have passed the knowledge on to the Death Eaters."

As if in answer, a mad, cackling laugh that he knew well rode the wind. Harry pushed his eyes open, and saw Bellatrix Lestrange hurrying forward, her cloak billowing. Behind her came four other Death Eaters, all men from the way they were walking. Harry shuddered. One of them flared with such foul Dark magic that he could feel it from here. He thought it quite as bad as the power that his magic-eating snake had swallowed.

He looked at Snape, his tired mind jolted into motion again. "You could pretend that you're loyal to Voldemort, and that you've captured me—" he suggested.

"I have chosen my side," said Snape, his voice deliberate, and rose to his feet, moving behind Harry as he drew his wand. "I choose again, and again, and that side is yours, Harry."

Bellatrix laughed again, and increased her stride. "Come to offer yourself and the babies up on a platter, Severus?" she asked shrilly. "Our Lord told us all about you, and I must say, I look forward to having you in a nice quiet room, with nothing but Crucios between us."

"You always did have a stunning lack of imagination, Bellatrix," Snape answered coolly, and aimed his wand. "Sectumsempra!"

Bellatrix sang out a defensive spell as the curse aimed at her, and then fired back a hex whose pronunciation Harry missed under the sudden roaring in his ears. The four male Death Eaters were

spreading out next to Bellatrix, one of them nearly in the lake, and the magic was overcoming his senses.

Two of them were preparing complicated spells. One wore an intricate glamour, so deep and old that Harry wasn't sure what it could possibly be hiding. And the one who flared with foul magic went on flaring with it, the scent growing into the stink of raw sewage until Harry saw the Death Eater's face.

It was Rodolphus Lestrange, from all the descriptions he had heard, but he had faced the man before, and knew him to be slow and rather stupid next to his brilliant, insane wife. Now, his eyes were wide, his mouth distended in a smile that Harry had last seen on Sirius's face.

"No," Harry whispered.

"You did not destroy all of me, Harry," said Voldemort's voice, calm and patient, through Rodolphus's lips. "The locket, but not the bit of my soul within it. It fled, and sought out my loyal Death Eaters. That is what comes of playing with your food." He smiled more widely, a grotesque gesture, animated by rage and hatred. Harry wondered then how much Voldemort must hate him, given that he would have known all along that Harry was the one who had bounced back the Killing Curse at him. "This arrangement does have its disadvantages, of course, namely the lack of power and the time it will take to grow a new body, but I am fresh, and I have magic that I know how to use. Unlike you, Harry." He clucked his tongue.

Then he aimed his wand. "Caeco!"

Harry heard Connor's wild cry from beside him, and whirled, even though he already knew what he would see; he knew the effects of Caeco. His brother was groping at his face, his eyes wide and staring. He was blind.

Harry turned back. His tiredness was still present, and his limbs felt like bags of sand. He knew that his rage would stop fueling him in a moment, but for now he could speak. "Blind me instead, you bastard!"

"Why should I?" Voldemort asked, smiling through Rodolphus's lips. "I want you to see what will happen to your brother, Harry." He nodded to one of the Death Eaters who stood beside him, one of the two who did not wear the glamour. "Your turn, Mulciber."

Harry shivered. Mulciber was an Imperius Curse specialist, renowned for his control of the mind, and he was aiming his wand at Connor now. Harry gave Snape a hopeless look, but Snape was locked in a duel with Bellatrix and did not even have time to look away from the spells he was firing.

"Imperio!"

Harry saw his brother stiffen, and knew what he would be feeling, the soft and coaxing voice that would be invading his mind, whispering to him what to do. Connor grasped his left hand with his right and began to bend his middle finger towards the back of his hand.

Harry sobbed. He didn't think he could do anything about it. If he unleashed a wash of magic right now, it would simply strike out at everyone in sight, so tired was he and so weak was his control.

He didn't think he could do that. How could he? He would prefer to just use defensive magic and get everyone out of here alive, shield Snape and Connor from the Death Eaters, deliver some stinging blows but no more than that.

His eyes locked on Rodolphus's face, Voldemort's cruel gaze and crueler smile. If I let them go, I'm letting Voldemort go.

There are some times I can't do what I want to do.

He heard the snap as Connor's finger broke, and the silence of someone under Imperio that was even more painful than a shriek would have been.

Sobbing, Harry lashed out, not using his magic as a snake this time, but simply draining, pulling, sucking all the magic away from the Death Eaters. He took their spells. He saw the glamour on the Death Eater on the far left shimmer and fade, revealing a different face and

features, but he didn't care. He felt the magic of their bodies struggle for a moment and then remain intact—he wasn't pulling enough to drain their inner strength, only that floating loose around them—but he didn't care. He heard Snape shout in anger as his own dueling spells vanished, but he didn't care.

He let the magic flood away like high tide, and then brought it back around in a wave, directing all the force at Rodolphus-Voldemort, not trying to be coordinated, not trying to be controlled, all the desires of his mind focused on one thought: I want it to stop. I want him to go away.

The magic hit Rodolphus, and sent him flying. For a moment, Harry saw a slight dark shape in flight over the lake, like a moth.

Then he burst into flame, inside and out, fire that consumed him. Harry felt the bit of Voldemort's soul struggling madly, trying to fly free, and then felt it wither. Rodolphus's magic departed in the same moment.

He was dying. Ashes fell into the water.

He was dead. Bones and skin and flesh followed the ashes in an obscene rain.

Harry dropped his face into his hands and wept, collapsing as exhaustion and grief and the wash of the magic fell onto him. His body was entirely free of the magic he had swallowed in the Shrieking Shack now.

He heard Bellatrix give a long, descending wail, with no hint of sanity anywhere in it. Harry was open even to her pain just then, raw and bleeding, with no defenses. She had lost her husband and her risen lord in the same moment. Harry didn't know which one she might have loved more, but he wasn't surprised to roll over and see her staring at him with hatred in her eyes, the desire for vengeance written on her face.

"Wait, baby," she breathed. "Wait, and I'll come for you."

Then she turned and began to run, back around the lake and in the direction they had come from. The other Death Eaters followed her, Mulciber and a man who was probably Rabastan.

The last man, the one who had worn the glamour, lingered a moment to stare at Harry, as though he knew that no magic was left in the area to strike at him. His true face was heavy-featured, his eyes large and dark and intelligent behind the madness that Azkaban had induced. He cocked his head as Snape knelt behind Harry and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Chosen a good one, Severus," he said, sounding almost cheerful.

"Rosier," Snape snarled back, his anger not quite hiding his surprise. "Didn't die after all, did you?"

"No, Dolohov did," said the man Harry knew must be Evan Rosier, sounding quite unconcerned. "But everyone thought they saw me die, and, well, it seemed prudent to keep it that way." His face wore a smile so sudden it seemed to have simply appeared there from somewhere else, and he nodded to Harry. "That your future Lord?"

"My magic is returning, Rosier," Snape said, softly, dangerously, and aimed his wand.

"Can't stay, I'm afraid," said Rosier. "For I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep." He chuckled when he finished, and then turned and began to speed around the lake.

Harry turned to Connor. His brother blinked, one hand feeling at his eyes. He could see again, from the way he stared at Harry. Then he looked down at his broken finger, blinked again, and fainted.

Harry felt like doing the same thing, but he had things to do first. He turned to Snape.

"Read the memory of what happened from my mind," he said.

"I saw it, Harry."

Snape's voice was desperate with pity, which Harry didn't want. He reached out, bracing himself with one hand on his guardian's shoulder, and whispered, "No, not that. Before."

He dropped his barriers, and felt Snape slip in, fast and easy, so used to working with his mind that he found the memory of Sirius's death and what had happened in the Shrieking Shack the moment Harry willed him to see it. Harry felt Snape draw in a sharp breath, felt him shudder, and nodded wearily.

"Yes," he muttered. "Take care of his body and the Pensieve and the knife, won't you?"

"I will." Snape sounded shaken for the first time that Harry could remember. "Get some rest." He paused, and then added, "It was not your fault, Harry, you realize. You had to kill him."

"Rest sounds good," said Harry, and dropped away into a blackness that was far less confusing than the world he had just made for himself.

Chapter Forty-Three: Starborn

Snape looked down at Harry in his bed in the hospital wing and shook his head. No. It had been three days, and still his fury—that Harry had been so badly hurt, that Harry had felt compelled to go after Voldemort and Black alone, that Harry had had to fight and kill a Death Eater—had not eased. All the Houses except Slytherin had lost nearly a hundred points in Potions, and McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were giving him significant looks. Snape did not care.

His ward had almost died for the fifth and sixth times this year, even if one counted only the werewolf, his journey home, the spiders, and the bout of pain that had knocked him unconscious for a week. Voldemort had nearly killed him, and then Voldemort had nearly killed him again. Snape had been too far away to help the first time, and useless the next, locked in a duel with Bellatrix as he had been.

He had been helpless. In a sense, he still was, as Harry hadn't awokened in the last three days.

It made him furious.

And Harry had done it all for the sake of Black and his brother, who had spent two days asleep in the hospital wing, his broken finger healed almost at once by Madam Pomfrey, before he was awokened and sent back to Gryffindor Tower. He had come and sat by Harry's bedside in silence several times in the day since, his eyes haunted and his face pale. Snape supposed he was facing his own demons.

He did not care. Things could have turned out so much darker, and he, Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin and former Death Eater, had not made one damn bit of difference.

The door of the hospital wing creaked open. Snape turned sharply. It was the Potter brat, who came over and sat in a chair at Harry's bedside without a word.

Snape glared at him. Potter turned his head away and concentrated on Harry.

For this boy, Harry had nearly given up everything.

And for Black, Snape reminded himself, but he almost instantly turned his mind away from that unpleasant subject. He did not like thinking about Black. He had cast several preservation spells on the body and moved it to a quiet, unused classroom, until whatever funeral arrangements that Dumbledore—presumably—would make. The werewolf had no money, and certainly neither Pettigrew nor James Potter had shown any sign of wanting to come forward and claim their dead friend.

Snape had envied the peaceful expression on Black's face. In the end, he had died doing what he knew was right, just like any other self-righteous, boneheaded Gryffindor.

And if his mind had been kept further unbalanced by Snape's empathy potions, making him easier prey for Voldemort and Voldemort more able to go after Harry, so that Snape had endangered his own ward, there was no way to know.

Snape wondered if he should discuss that with Harry. He wondered if he was capable of having a discussion with Harry about Black and not making some disparaging remark. He hadn't been able to keep the sarcasm out of his voice when he had clashed with Dumbledore. Of course, Dumbledore had ordered Snape to turn over the Dark Lord's Pensieve and the Black family knife he had used as well as Sirius's body. Snape had refused. There had been...some words.

But for you, Snape thought, his eyes lingering on Harry, his mind oddly mingling the vision of the sleeping boy with the memory of the crying baby from the Pensieve and the exhausted child-adult who had let him peer into his mind before collapsing, I will try.

As long as you wake up. Wake up, Harry.
Harry came awake slowly.

He had the feeling that he should hurt more than he did. Instead, he blinked and put a hand over his face, and though his hand trembled with weakness and did not quite manage to block out the sunshine, it

was only weakness, and not pain. Harry felt his chest hitch with the depth of his sigh. Good. He'd had quite enough pain to last him a while.

"Harry."

Harry lowered his hand and met Snape's eyes. The professor was the only one in the hospital wing, which comforted Harry. Let me take these confrontations one at a time. I don't think I can face them more populated than that.

"Professor?" he whispered, and blinked. His voice actually sounded halfway normal.

"You have been asleep since Saturday evening, and today is Thursday morning, Harry," said Snape, correctly anticipating his next question. "And Poppy has kept you regularly supplied with water." He waved his wand and charmed a glass of it to float towards Harry, anyway, then helped him sit up so he could drink it. Harry obliged, carefully sipping so that the cold liquid would help settle his stomach instead of disturb it. The longer he drank, the longer he thought he could avoid the probing questions that Snape was likely to ask.

Not for long, said the voice in the back of his head, in admiring tones. He's a hard one, he is.

And sure enough, Snape said, in the soft whisper that indicated his true anger, "When are you planning to put down the cup and face me, Harry?"

Harry sighed and tried to stretch to put the cup back on the table beside the bed. Snape's magic seized control of it and floated it away instead. Harry settled back on his pillows and gave Snape a look. "You won't even let me reach that far?" he asked.

"You suffered enormous damage," said Snape. "Magical exhaustion, scratches from the house elf on your throat and shoulders, injuries from where the justice ritual held you in place, and mental and emotional scars." He leaned forward. "This time, Harry, your mind is

not in imminent danger of collapse, as it was after the debacle in the Chamber of Secrets. And this time, you actively refused help.”

Harry braced himself for a yelling session, for all that he’d never heard Snape raise his voice.

Snape watched him in silence for a long moment, then shook his head. “What do you believe would have happened if you died?” he asked.

“Uh.” Harry blinked. This wasn’t the way he had expected the interrogation to go. “Well, Voldemort would have tortured you and Hermione and Draco, and taken Connor with him. He told me so, and I don’t believe he had any reason to lie. He knew the truth would cause me more despair.” Harry shuddered. Now that he was out of it, he had time to think about his terror, and how much he had feared that what Voldemort predicted would come true.

“And what else?” Snape’s voice had descended an inch or two towards ice.

“Voldemort would have killed Sirius, too,” said Harry, trying to think of what else. “And the Death Eaters would probably have inflicted a lot of damage on Hogwarts before anyone could stop them. And the Dementors would probably have killed Peter.”

“And what else?” Snape urged him.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. “I know what you want me to say, sir, and it’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Harry, opening his eyes and focusing on Snape with a frown, “you wouldn’t have had time to mourn me, or be angry with me. Voldemort would be too busy torturing you. You’d feel pain instead.”

Snape briefly raked a hand down his face. Harry wasn’t sure what the gesture indicated, anger or weariness. Perhaps both.

"Harry," Snape whispered, "we would have helped you." He fixed his gaze on Harry's face. "Has it occurred to you that the Dark Lord took Black and your brother to lure you into a trap? That you were the one he wanted to destroy? I have seen the memory in the Pensieve. I understand why."

Harry glanced away from him. Once again, as when he had been in Draco's mind, as when he had first come to suspect that he might be the Boy-Who-Lived, he could feel a gulf yawning beneath him. He did not want to step into it. "But it didn't happen," he said. "And if it had, then you would have been busy suffering."

Snape gave a mutter that Harry couldn't quite make out, except for the words "blunt" and "utterly serious." Then he said, "Harry, your life matters to me beyond what would have happened to me, or anyone else, if you had not lived. Your life matters for itself. You are not a sacrifice, not to me. In fact, I would prefer that you stopped regarding yourself that way, and associating with your brother altogether." His voice sharpened. "If you had taken me along as help, then you might not have suffered quite so much."

Harry winced, and regret briefly flooded him, before he shook his head. "And you probably would not have lived, sir," he said. "I barely did, and I think Connor only did because Voldemort wasn't really concentrating on him."

"That was the wrong tack, then," said Snape. "Harry—look at me."

Harry did, reluctantly. Snape met his eyes fiercely.

"You matter," he said. "You do. You are not only a weapon, not only a shield or defense or sacrifice. You told me once to stop treating you as a child, and it is true that I should not do so. However, you are also my ward." He took a deep breath, as though he were dredging up courage from under a dark lake. "I would appreciate it if you stopped thinking I was lying when I told you these things. And if you have no more need of me as a guardian, then perhaps it is time that we owled the Ministry and turned you back over to your father, who has

expressed an interest in visiting you in a few weeks, when you are fully recovered, and he is out of the maze he is in."

Harry experienced an immediate flash of panic. No! I don't want Snape to stop being my guardian—

And he blinked, and sat there staring at nothing, as the fact that he had felt those things broke over him like a storm.

He did like mattering to Snape. He wanted the guardianship to be deeper than a mere legal pretense to fool the Ministry. He liked the thought that Snape had tried to come after him, had tried to stop him from facing Voldemort alone, had come to him at Christmas and badgered him into accepting the guardianship again, had done all he could to protect and train Harry in Occlumency and Legilimency and Potions and other arts he thought Harry might need.

And if he liked mattering to Snape, he could hardly let Snape think he did not matter to Harry.

He met Snape's eyes. "My life matters to you," he said, testing.

Snape nodded, a tense little motion that hardly bent his neck. His eyes never left Harry's.

"You would have been upset if I died, and not just because of the consequences to you or the wizarding world."

Snape bared his teeth, as if to say that one didn't deserve an answer.

"You like being my guardian, and not just to spite my father or the Ministry or Dumbledore."

"If that was all I wanted," Snape snarled, "I could have thought of many, many other ways to obtain it, ways that are less likely to make me die of rage and terror."

Harry closed his eyes. Damn it, he was going to cry, and he didn't want to. He wasn't run-down any more, he wasn't exhausted any more, he wasn't fragile and shaky any more, he shouldn't cry, crying

was something babies or children did, it was all right when Connor did it, oh shit no here came the tears—

Snape reached out and put a hand gently on his shoulder. Harry leaned into the touch, and then scooted closer and snaked out an arm around Snape's waist. Snape returned the embrace fiercely.

Somewhere in the middle of the tears, it occurred to Harry that Snape had never intended to stop being his guardian, and had used a sneaky, underhanded, Slytherin tactic to force this epiphany on him.

He didn't much care.

His life mattered to someone. He, himself, mattered to Snape because he was Harry, and not because of what he could do. He finally believed it.

As if I won't seize that with both hands.

Draco came prepared. He knew what Harry's confrontation with Snape had been like, because Snape had told him. He knew that it was going to be different with him. Harry had been forced to see that Snape's affection for him was genuine. He had, however, heard Connor compel Draco, and been in his mind, and tried to believe—Draco had felt him trying to believe—that all those emotions were only the result of compulsion.

It was an easy excuse. It was a way out for Harry, if he thought that only one person liked him for who he was. He could let Snape in, but go right back to treating Draco as if he were someone who needed to be left behind in safety.

Fuck that, Draco decided, and strolled in and sat down in the chair beside Harry's bed. Snape was occupying Harry's prat of a brother with a detention. No one would disturb them.

Draco had a very simple plan.

He was not going to let Harry ignore him. And before he left tonight, he was going to extract some promises that Harry would never do certain stupid things again.

Harry welcomed him with a reserved smile. He had a bowl of porridge in his lap, and was scooping spoonfuls of it into his mouth. Draco sniffed. Porridge was nothing compared to what they'd had in the Great Hall the last two days. He would be glad when Harry was up and about and could eat proper meals again. They were bland and boring without him. No one appreciated his wit when he tried to use it.

"Hello, Draco," said Harry softly, and put the spoon back in the bowl. "Come to have your say about me running off into danger?"

"I don't think I need to say a lot," said Draco, adopting the posture his mother always used when they were visiting people she considered their social inferiors. "A few very simple words. The affection you saw in my mind when you thought Connor compelled me? That was real."

Harry blinked at him, then shook his head, a faint smile appearing in the place of the reserved one. "No, Draco," he said, in the patient tone that normally made Draco want to scream. "I felt it. It was preventing the passage of normal thoughts into your mind. It was—"

"It was a barrier made of what was already there," Draco said. It was simple after all, this clear, direct, Gryffindor-like honesty. "What was always there."

Harry licked his lips, then shook his head. "It can't—"

"Yes, it can," said Draco. Another part of the plan was not to let Harry talk what was clearly nonsense. "You're my friend, Harry. That's it."

"But what I felt there wasn't the kind of friendship that Connor has for Ron," Harry argued.

Draco curled his lip before he could stop himself. "I would thank you not to compare me to Weasley," he said, and played his trump card. Perhaps it was a bit too soon, but clearly, if he was going about comparing Draco to Weasley, Harry needed the help. "Malfoys have

always done things better than Weasleys. We outfly them, we're better than they are at Quidditch, we're better wizards, we're not a disgrace to the name of pureblood and they are. And we outlove them, too."

Harry's smile froze. "Draco," he said, voice gone small and helpless.

Draco snorted. "Come off it, Harry. I was conscious most of the time you were in my mind, you know. I know what you felt. I love you. Not enough to keep from hexing you if you deny it, either."

Harry shook his head desperately, his hair falling over his scar. The scar had gone back to being a normal pale lightning bolt, Draco was pleased to see, without the bloody color that had limned it while Harry lay unconscious. "But, Draco—compulsion played some part in it, it had to—"

"It did not," said Draco. "It only dragged what was there to the surface, and kept it there long enough that you had to see it." He met Harry's eyes. "You can cast Legilimens on me now if you like, and it will still be there."

"You can't love me like that!" Harry yelped.

Draco laughed. Harry actually looked indignant. "Why not? I know that you love me as protectively, and your brother, and probably Snape, too."

"But—that's what I do, that's what I was raised to do," said Harry, his voice nearly a wail. "That strength of love has to be unnatural, doesn't it, if it comes from my training? And anyway," he added, "how could it apply to me?"

"Because it does," said Draco.

"It has to be the result of compulsion."

"It isn't."

"Then it's the result of—"

“No.”

“Then you must only imagine—“

“No.” Draco leaned forward and clasped Harry’s hand. “I’ve given you sight of this before, Harry. What do you think your serpent shows? You should look at it more often,” he couldn’t help adding. While the bottle Harry had given him showing his emotions was important to him, the glass serpent Draco had bonded with the same enchantment for Harry’s birthday didn’t seem all that important to Harry, and that did hurt. “I told you that I didn’t like you going away. I would have been perfectly happy to have you at Malfoy Manor for the entire holiday last summer. I tried to keep you from going after your brother and godfather, because I didn’t care that you loved them, too. I was practically shouting it from the rooftops, undignified as that would be for a Malfoy. I’ve tried and tried and tried to make you see it, and you wouldn’t, you stubborn prat. So now you don’t have a choice,” he finished severely.

Harry simply stared at him, then turned his head away. Draco grabbed his chin and turned his face back.

Draco didn’t have to be a Legilimens himself to see the stunned disbelief in those eyes slowly melting into acceptance. Harry knew that Draco wasn’t lying. He had probably had ground for the revelation prepared by being forced to acknowledge that his life mattered to Snape.

Well, fuck that, too, Draco decided. This was his victory, and he was going to claim it as such.

“This is so strange,” Harry whispered. “I don’t think this is supposed to be happening. I don’t find out my best friend loves me a few days after my godfather dies and Voldemort has to leave yet again.”

“When has anything around you ever been normal?” Draco shoved his chair closer to the bed. “Do you believe me now?”

Harry nodded, as if hypnotized.

“Good,” said Draco. “This is the part where I get to be bossy and demanding.” He felt a vicious delight flood him as Harry simply blinked. Merlin, I love this part. “First, if you start mourning over anything that happened to you, come and find me. Immediately. I want to hear it.”

“Why?” Harry whispered.

Draco shook his shoulder. “Harry,” he said warningly. “I don’t tolerate idiocy, not when you believe me.”

Harry swallowed. “All right.”

“Second,” said Draco, “once you leave the hospital wing, you’re either with me or Snape for the rest of the school year. I know that Snape is planning to keep you here for the summer. We’ll see about that.” Privately, he was trying to work out a bargain wherein Harry would stay at the Manor for four weeks. So far, Snape wasn’t willing, but Draco was determined. “If you really feel that you have to be alone, you have to tell us where you’re going.”

Harry hesitated, then said, “All right.”

“Third,” said Draco, “if you get angry at me, you tell me. If you want an apology, demand it.”

“That’s going to be hard work,” Harry murmured. He seemed to be somewhere between pleasure and shock.

“I know. I don’t care. Do it.”

Harry nodded.

“Finally,” said Draco, “you stop with this nonsense about compulsion, or whatever other excuse you find to deny that people love you. I really will hex you if you say something about it again, or if I look up and think you’re thinking about it.”

“All right,” said Harry.

His eyes were starting to get a little glassy. Draco gently removed the porridge bowl from his lap and put it on the table, then arranged the pillows so Harry could lie down. Harry stifled a yawn. "Why am I still here?" he muttered. "I know that Madam Pomfrey fixed everything physically wrong with me."

"Shock and magical exhaustion, Harry," said Draco. "Madam Pomfrey doesn't think you should have to deal with other students right now, and I agree. And you could sleep for about two months and still not recover all the rest you need. That's the fifth promise," he added. "You have to sleep a lot."

"That one will be no trouble to keep." Still and all, Harry fought the closing of his eyes. Stubborn prat, Draco thought, brushing his hair off his scar. "Did Connor apologize to you yet?"

Draco frowned. "For what?"

"Compelling you." Harry stared at him searchingly.

A tiny flame surged to life in Draco's heart, driving his satisfaction even higher. Harry wants his brother to apologize to me. He thinks of that even though he has every right to think that what happened to them excuses Connor that duty.

"He hasn't yet," he said, and watched as Harry's eyes glittered.

"I'll tell him," Harry muttered, closing his eyes. "He should have already. He's dumb not to have."

His muttering ceased, and his brow relaxed under Draco's fingers. Draco watched as his breathing smoothed out into sleep.

Then, and only then, did he allow himself to close his eyes and spend a few minutes just listening to Harry breathe, reassuring himself, with each drawn breath, that his best friend was still alive.

"That's the last of them, I think," Draco said.

Harry nodded as he watched the last strand of silver squirm off his wand and plunk into the Pensieve. He could still remember what had happened in the Shrieking Shack, perfectly well—he hadn't wanted the wand to take all his emotions and memories of that—but now they had a third back-up Pensieve, in addition to the two that Snape had already hidden, containing his vision of that night. If Dumbledore tried to Obliviate either him or Connor, or, for that matter, Snape, they were safe.

He leaned back against the pillows, shrugging when Draco fluffed them for him, but making no move to stop him. Draco still seemed to need the reassurance that Harry was alive to have pillows fluffed, and Harry was hardly going to deny him that.

"So," he said, when Draco had carefully set the Pensieve under his chair. "You were going to tell me what the rest of the school thinks, now that it's been a week."

Draco shot him an irritated look with touches of anxiety visible around the straining eyes.

"It's been a week," Harry repeated softly. "I can bear this, Draco. I can."

Draco nodded. "All right," he said. "It didn't take the Headmaster long to make up a story how Voldemort kidnapped both you and your brother with the help of Death Eaters, because he wanted to use the magic that flows between twins to aid in his resurrection. Black fought him and died, heroically."

"Well, that part's true," said Harry. Why did Draco say it with disdain? This is his own cousin he's talking about, and my godfather.

Draco snorted. "He died to make up for his mistake, Harry. That's a better reason, and it's one that the Headmaster will never admit to."

Harry concealed his sigh. "And the other parts of it?"

"That the Death Eaters retreated before you, taking Voldemort's half-resurrected body with them," said Draco, his voice a low drone. Harry

wondered if he was practicing to keep emotions out of his voice, or if he'd merely heard the story so many times that he didn't care about it any more. "They got interrupted by the Dementors, who came after them because they were escaped Azkaban prisoners. The Dementors sucked out Voldemort's soul, and destroyed Rodolphus Lestrange in the process. Then the Death Eaters fled, and the Dementors went after them." He sat back and lifted his eyes to Harry's face, and Harry knew without a doubt that Draco was not bored. He looked furious. "Nothing about the role you played, Harry. Nothing."

Harry smiled faintly. "I didn't really expect him to say anything about it."

"But aren't you outraged?" Draco demanded.

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore worked so hard to keep me from finding out the truth. The least he can do now is keep others from finding out a shred of it. And he wouldn't want anyone to know that the one of the teachers he most favored and protected was possessed by Voldemort. He'll give up a chance at promoting Connor's heroism to protect Sirius's reputation."

Draco snorted. "He might have saved his breath. No one believes him."

Harry blinked. That was a surprise. The Headmaster was still the Headmaster, after all, with the power of a Light Lord and a heroic reputation and the ability to push his ideas by compulsion when all else failed. "No one?"

Draco shook his head. "Too many people saw Snape dash out of Hogwarts as if his cloak was on fire. Too many people know that Granger spent some time unconscious up in the North Tower. Too many people realize that the Dementors haven't returned to Hogwarts grounds at all, even to hunt for Pettigrew. And too many people felt the utter explosion of magic when you freed the justice ritual and destroyed the Dark Lord's new body, even though they don't know what it means."

Harry gnawed his lip. "I'm not sure what we ought to do," he said finally. "I don't want anyone to think that Sirius was a traitor, either, and having too many people know about the prophecy is dangerous."

"Don't you want the credit for what you did, though?" Draco said, a whine entering his voice. "You are driving me mad with this, Harry. How can you not want people to know who you really are?"

Harry smiled faintly. "You told me once that I was a Slytherin in every possible way," he reminded Draco. "And I said that I wasn't, because I lacked ambition. I still do. Or, at least, I don't care if everyone knows about what I did."

"I thought I'd cured you of that," said Draco. "I really should have. Perhaps I should try again."

"Harry?"

Harry turned his head, blinking. Hermione stood at the door of the hospital wing, one hand clenched around it. "Madam Pomfrey said that I'd find you here," she muttered. "And that you could have visitors now."

"Where else would you have expected to find him, Granger?" Draco was sneering again. Harry shook his head. He sneers when he has no reason, as well as when he has plenty of reason. "And he can have one visitor at a time, and I'm here. Go away."

"That's not what Madam Pomfrey said," Hermione countered, and came forward even when Draco leaped to his feet. She looked directly into Harry's eyes. "Maybe we should ask Harry if he wants me to stay."

Harry sighed. He suspected he was in for a scolding, thanks to knocking Hermione unconscious and leaving her on the floor, but he couldn't avoid it forever. "Sit down, Hermione," he said, and Transfigured the table next to the bed into a chair. His magic was growing bored with nothing to do again, and this was a harmless use of it, no matter how Draco glared.

"Thank you," said Hermione primly. She sat and smoothed her skirt over her knees, then looked expectantly at him.

Harry waited.

"What you did was stupid," Hermione began. "You put me so thoroughly to sleep that I couldn't even wake up and inform someone else where you'd gone. Like Professor McGonagall. She would have helped you, Harry, you know she would."

Harry nodded. "I know. And I didn't want her help, and I didn't want yours. I wanted to go into this on my own."

"So I suppose I'm good enough to ask for help with a Time Turner, but not anything else?" Hermione asked, her voice rising slightly.

"That was what I needed your help for, yes," said Harry. "I couldn't have done that part of it without you. Thank you."

"But the rest?" Hermione leaned forward, chin set.

Harry shook his head. "I can't apologize, Hermione. I didn't take anyone along. I'd already stunned Draco by that point, and I stunned Snape when he came after me again. I was as careful as I could be, and two people still died." His voice cracked, and he blinked hard, Sirius's death coming back to strike him unexpectedly. "What if one of them had been you? Or what if there'd been a third death because you wanted to come along? I couldn't risk it."

"It was my choice," said Hermione.

"She's making a lot of sense," said Draco, unhelpfully.

Harry glared at both of them. "And it was my choice to leave you both behind," he said. "If we start looking at it from this angle, we can find all sorts of choices to contradict each other's."

"I'm willing to forgive and forget, Harry James Potter," said Hermione loftily. "If you never do that again."

Harry winced. He couldn't imagine that it wouldn't be necessary to do that again. Hermione was clever, and even if he tried to leave her out of things, she would find her way into them. And it was true that he'd asked her for an awful lot of help this year, with the phoenix web if nothing else, and might need to do it again. If he made a promise not to leave her out of things or behind...

Then he got an idea. Perhaps Hermione was so determined to come because she'd heard only the Headmaster's false story and not seen the truth. He nodded to Draco. "Let Hermione look into the Pensieve," he said. "Then she'll know what we faced."

He saw Hermione's expression brighten. Well, she did always want knowledge, Harry thought, leaning back. And if the choice is giving her a few bad dreams or risking her life... I'll take the bad dreams.

He closed his eyes while Hermione put her face into the Pensieve and watched the memories. He had several things to do, and he wanted to arrange them carefully in his mind, so he didn't forget any of them. He had to make sure Connor had apologized to Draco. He had to decide, with Connor, on what they were going to say to Dumbledore. He had to think about what sort of story they would spread to explain what had happened that night, as well as the absence of the Dementors. He had to make it quite, quite clear that Connor was staying with him for the summer, and not with Lily.

He had to settle that last with Snape, who was not being rational about the thought of Harry staying with Lupin, or some other place that was more welcoming to Connor, but didn't want Connor with Harry, either.

The twins had spent enough time together in the last few days, private time, that Harry knew Connor would agree (though so far he had either not agreed to apologize to Draco, or Draco was lying when he said Connor had not). They had talked nearly nonstop for hours, and then sat in silence again for the same length of time. Connor was recovering slowly from Sirius's loss, and from what he called the sickening experience of having Imperio in his head and being blind for a short time. He could put on a good blank face to fool everyone else who looked at him. It saddened Harry to realize that he was the

only one who knew his brother well enough to look beneath the surface and see how false that mask was. At least Harry had Snape and Draco, both, to recognize the same truths about him.

He opened his eyes and asked Draco, "Did Connor apologize to you for compelling you?"

"No," said Draco, but his eyes flickered to the right.

Harry frowned. "He did so."

"I don't have to talk about that if I don't want to," said Draco, folding his arms. "It's a private matter between me and Connor Potter."

"Draco—"

Hermione abruptly jerked her head out of the Pensieve with a gasp. Harry glanced at her, expecting to see shock and horror in her eyes. And there was some of each there, but there was also a Gryffindor's golden, gleaming courage.

"How could I possibly let you face that alone?" she asked Harry. "Either you or Connor? I'll take that promise that you won't leave me behind, now."

Harry groaned and looked to Draco, but Draco only looked rather thoroughly entertained. Sighing, Harry reached out, put his hand on Hermione's, and gave his promise, in the name of Merlin and his magic.

Should have remembered she was a Gryffindor, he thought darkly. Showing them danger only makes them more eager to jump into it. Harry woke slowly. He knew it was late, probably late Sunday evening, though he was still given to sleeping long stretches without warning, and it might be early Monday morning. There was no one else in the hospital wing with him, by the sound. Early Monday morning, then, Harry thought as he stretched. If it was before midnight, Madam Pomfrey would have been bustling around.

He glanced to the side, and blinked when he saw a letter lying on the table beside his bed. It hadn't been there when he went to sleep, and he thought any owl would have woken him. But he picked up his glasses, cast a small Lumos to add to the faint light spells that had sprung into being when he opened his eyes, and opened the letter. The paper was slowly turning purple, he saw.

The writing was familiar, or rather, familiar in its lack of familiarity.

Dear Harry:

I have left a charm on this letter. If it is turning purple, it has been an hour since I have visited you. If it is turning gold, two hours. If it is turning orange, three hours. Past that, the parchment will resume its normal color. It is not safe for me to linger here longer than that.

Harry's eyes darted around the hospital wing, but he saw no one, not even the faint shimmer that would have marked a Disillusionment Charm or an Invisibility Cloak. He looked back at the letter.

I have failed you.

I have failed you in all the ways that matter. I have given you information you already had, and not explained the import of new information. I have promised you protection, and not fulfilled the promise. I have tested you, trying to see how strong a leader you were, when I should have aided you outright, and never doubted you. You killed for the first time last Saturday. The part of me that thought you could never kill, even to protect those dearest to you, is at peace.

I owe you three debts now—one in the name of my first family, one in the name of my second, and one in my own name, for failing to protect you. I will understand if you do not wish to speak to me. If that is so, burn this letter, and I will know, and depart.

If you wish to know who I am, and to accept that I mean to make up for my broken promises, despite my lack of doing so in the past, then lay the letter on the table, face the door of the hospital wing, and ask me to enter.

Starborn.

Harry let out a sharp little breath and laid the letter down. He had considered burning it, but only for the barest moment. He did want to know who Starborn was. And allies were never to be disdained. This ally had taken risks for him. Merlin knew how he had managed to learn that Sirius was still the heir of the Black family, or how his parents had switched Secret-Keepers. If nothing else, Harry thought he should learn that in turn, so that Starborn couldn't be used against him.

"Enter," he called.

The door of the hospital wing slowly swung open, and a slender, hooded figure stepped through. Harry held his wand high enough that the Lumos glittered on the shadows under the hood.

"Show your face," he said. "Who are you?"

"I thought the wording in the last letter would have let you know, Harry," said a familiar voice, as a pair of hands rose and threw back the hood. "But perhaps not. I have never hinted clearly enough."

Narcissa Malfoy walked calmly over to him and took the chair beside his bed, watching him, while Harry stared at her.

Starborn. Born of the house of Black, but not named after a star. Of course. I should have known.

He recovered his voice after a moment. "Millicent said that you were a man."

Narcissa chuckled, a faint, polite sound. "I wrote to Adalrico under the name Starborn. He assumed that I was a man, and passed the assumption on to his daughter." She paused for a moment. "Hawthorn Parkinson knew the truth."

Harry blinked, then nodded, remembering his second conversation with her, when he had delivered her first vial of Wolfsbane Potion. Hawthorn had smiled a bit, oddly, when Harry spoke of Starborn as

"he," but had gone along with it, apparently seeing no reason to disillusion him.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Because you were not taking on the leadership duties that you would need to," said Narcissa. "You knew me already, and you would weigh any words out of my mouth, about Lords and compulsion and those who are not Lords, more lightly than you would weigh them from a seemingly objective outside source. If I could tell you these things, someone who was not the mother of your best friend, then you might accept them and become the wizard we need, the powerful one who is not a Lord." Her eyes glittered. "You do have a problem with that, you know, Harry—deciding that those closest to you cannot speak the truth because they are blinded by their regard for you."

Harry inclined his head. "I know. But could you not have simply told me the truth about the Dark wizards you were contacting? About Sirius?"

"I did not know the whole truth about Sirius myself," Narcissa said simply. "I took a chance sneaking into 12 Grimmauld Place, the chance that Sirius would not have simply shut the wards against me—as he could have, being heir, did he but think of it. There, I found the Pensieves full of the memories he had removed from his head, presumably so he would not have to spend his nights thinking of his brother and Pettigrew." She paused. "And it did not work."

Harry shook his head, thinking of the nightmares of two dark figures, Sirius and Regulus, that he had had, the nightmares Sirius had had for years. Harry's mind had tried to warn him, but it had done it in no language he could understand.

"And then I saw the tapestry," Narcissa whispered. "Up until then, I had not thought of what it meant that Sirius could slip so freely into and out of the Black estates. I had simply assumed the estate was in legal limbo, with Sirius disowned, Regulus dead, Bellatrix in Azkaban, Andromeda blasted off the tapestry for marrying a Muggleborn wizard, and the inheritance never formally assigned to me. I was not the heir, either, but I thought the wards might accept me, for I was never cast

out of the Black family. Then I realized Sirius was the heir, and something was badly wrong. Dumbledore wanted access to my family's treasures. And, of course, Dark artifacts of the kind that had attacked my son could have come from our family."

"Then you could have written to me then," Harry insisted. "You could have told me the truth. Perhaps this would have been avoided."

Narcissa's mouth twisted as if she'd bitten into a lime. "I let my pride blind me," she said. "I observed Sirius closely, and decided at last that the golden ornament around his neck really had tamed his thoughts, the way that everyone insisted that it had. I examined the letters to Lucius, and convinced myself they were not in Sirius's handwriting. I know now, of course," she added softly, "that his handwriting was already wavering, controlled by Voldemort in his mind."

"How did you know about that in detail?" Harry asked.

"I have spoken with Severus and with Draco," said Narcissa. "Neither knew I was Starborn, of course.

"I examined the wards on 12 Grimmauld Place again, and found them in an advanced state of decay. I returned to what had been my original hypothesis, when I first advised you to watch out for Sirius—that he had been involved, somehow, in the passage of Black heirlooms to other hands and in the attack of the Lestranges in your first year, but that it was probably negligence, failure to keep up the wards on the house that had let thieves in, and failure to protect key information in his mind from a Legilimens. I thought he might even have sold artifacts to pay off gambling debts, and not realized whom he was selling them to." Narcissa closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. "I spoke with both Fenrir Greyback and Walden Macnair, pretending to be a reclusive Dark witch interested in the Dark Lord's service, and both of them hinted at a strong ally inside Hogwarts, but my every glimpse of Sirius convinced me that they could not mean him. He was not strong. I trusted my own conclusions over the evidence, and this is where it led me, with your life in danger multiple times."

She opened her eyes and fixed them on Harry. “I owe you the debt of my failure,” she said. “I owe you a debt from the family I married into, because you have protected my son at the near-cost of your own life. And I owe you a debt from the family I was born into. The Blacks have wronged you very greatly, Harry—I by my negligence, and Sirius by his. I would understand if you wished to have nothing more to do with me, or even to claim my life.”

She was prepared to give it, Harry realized with a start. Of course, the Blacks were one of the few families that had kept up most of the pureblood dances, even the most extreme, and one of the dances said that only blood could wash away the stain of breaking one’s word. Narcissa had promised to protect him, then played a dangerous game that could have ended with him dead, and certainly had ended with his life and her son’s life in danger. The Black customs would have dictated that she die for putting Draco in danger, even if not Harry.

Unless the one the debt was owed to chose otherwise.

Harry shook his head. “I want you to live,” he said.

Narcissa relaxed minutely, but inclined her head, as much to say that she knew he was not finished and should go on.

“I need you as an ally among the Dark wizards,” said Harry. “I assume that’s why you became Starborn in the first place, because there are wizards and witches who won’t listen to Narcissa Malfoy?”

Narcissa nodded. “I have information from my son, and through Lucius, that only someone who was a Death Eater or inside Hogwarts could apparently have. I trade it for their wary promises to consider alliance. Many of them would turn on me in an instant if they knew who I was, for lying to them if nothing else.”

She’s just put her life in my hands again, Harry realized. I could write to people like Adalrico and tell them she’s Starborn, and even if he forgave her, others wouldn’t.

It was not even a temptation. Harry had much more use for Narcissa alive than dead, and he was fond of her, both as Draco's mother and for her own sake. If nothing else, she was different from Lily in that she was sorry for making him a sacrifice, and willing to make up for it.

"I still need you," he said. "I want you to keep making alliances with the other purebloods, and especially the Dark wizards and former Death Eaters who won't listen to a child. That's how you can pay the debt that you owe me as yourself."

Narcissa nodded, eyes intent on his face.

"I want you to promise that you won't ever put Draco's life in danger again, for any reason," Harry said. "That's the Malfoy debt."

"Very well," said Narcissa. "And done. And the debt as a Black?"

Harry fussed with his hands a moment. He knew what he wanted to ask, but it might very well go over the line. He stalled by asking, "What's going to happen to 12 Grimmauld Place and the like now that Sirius is dead? Do they pass to you?"

Narcissa's mouth tightened in exasperation. "There is a loophole, or a problem, in the inheritance magic," she murmured. "The wards on all the houses have sealed tight now. I visited 12 Grimmauld Place yesterday, and it would not let me in. I have no idea why. For the moment, all the Black treasures are locked away beyond our reach."

Harry nodded. He was actually relieved. He didn't want to search among Dark magical weapons, but if he had access to them, he would have felt compelled to, just in case there was something there that could help in the course of the war. "Very well. Then I want you to take charge of Sirius's body. Give him a Black funeral."

Narcissa sat back hard in the chair, staring at him. "He was a blood traitor," she whispered. "He used false inheritance magic to stay heir to the family. And then he betrayed his new allegiances, too, not even having the courage to stand by his convictions."

"He died a hero, fighting for those convictions," said Harry. "And no one else has done anything for him. Dumbledore is too busy doing damage control. My father is Merlin knows where. Peter Pettigrew can't for obvious reasons, and Remus Lupin doesn't have the money—or, probably by now, the legal standing—to be the director of a funeral for a pureblood wizard." He met her eyes. "I want you to do it."

Narcissa watched him in calm silence, all her emotions vanished behind a cool mask. Harry waited. He knew that what he asked was profound, perhaps more than what the debt would grant him. He didn't care. He was asking for it, and he intended to go on asking for it until Narcissa either gave in or told him flat out to choose another option.

Then she nodded and stood. "Come with me, Harry, if you can walk," she said, extending a hand. "I will help you if you cannot. I think you should see this."

Harry blinked. What reading he'd done on the Blacks indicated their funerals had always been intensely private, restricted to blood or married family. "I was only his godson—"

"You are the one who asked for this," Narcissa cut in, her voice sharp as Polaris. "You are the reason he is having a funeral like this at all. And it will be done now. Tonight. This is your last chance to say farewell."

Harry watched her face. It stayed exactly the same. He was asking for something high and old, he realized slowly.

And she was returning something high and old—the honor to come along and see how the funeral was done.

Harry reached for his robes.

It hadn't taken them long to find Sirius's body. Narcissa had walked straight to it the moment they were out of the hospital wing. When Harry asked her how, she said simply that she could feel it. She was a Black, and he was a Black, and the connection was always strongest between those who were born into the family, rather than

married into it. Draco might have felt it, too, but Draco did not know the Black funeral customs, and would probably not have recognized the subtle tugging on his senses.

Now they were out of the school, Narcissa pausing courteously to rest whenever Harry needed to. The night was deeply dark, the moon hidden by clouds, and the only true light came from the Lumos on the end of Narcissa's wand. Sirius's body floated behind them.

Narcissa made for the shore of the lake, and Harry wondered if the Black funeral customs involved drowning. But it seemed Narcissa only sought a clear, flat spot to lay Sirius down, because she nodded at last and let his body drift to rest.

Then she drew Harry back a short distance. Harry found himself staring at his godfather, whose black hair was cast over his face. Thanks to the preservation spells Snape had cast, he looked as he had when he died. His gray eyes were shut, his face still in the same peaceful expression it had been.

Narcissa raised her head, her eyes seeking out the sky. Harry looked up, but still saw only clouds.

Then, to his shock, the clouds rolled smoothly back as though a hand had parted them, revealing a small expanse of stars. At the same moment, heavy, old magic settled around them. Harry struggled to breathe. The air reeked of dust, of bones, of the tomb. This was magic at least as ancient as the justice ritual, and as powerful. It turned around him, tolerating his presence, but focused on Narcissa.

"All the others," Narcissa said, voice gone unexpectedly high and unexpectedly clear, "say that they came from the earth or the sea, and they will return to the earth or the sea when they die. Only the Blacks have retained the core truth, the truth older than all the earths and all the seas. It was the stars that bore us in the beginning." She raised her wand. White light coursed along her arms, dazzlingly bright. Harry had to put a hand over his eyes as he squinted.

"Accept this one," Narcissa said, her voice growing loud enough to make the earth appear to shake, "Sirius Black, elder child of Canopus Black and Capella Black, elder brother of Regulus Black, proper heir of the Black line." The white light around her twitched, but Narcissa showed no sign of noticing. "Pureblood wizard, member of Gryffindor House, Auror, godfather of Harry Potter, who died with the courage of his convictions. Accept him now."

Harry felt as if he stood next to a blazing sun—or a star. The world around them had turned brilliant, in a way that somehow left room and space for intense shadows.

Then the light turned flaring blue-white with a touch of silver, and Narcissa's voice soared in triumph.

"From fire we come, to fire we return," she said, and gestured with her wand. "Sirius abscondit!"

A flash of white lightning struck down from the stars, and hit Sirius's body. It went up with a roar, as if he had been oil-soaked tinder. Harry took a step back, the magic around him surging forward like the tide to join with the white lightning in a whirling flow. For a moment, Sirius was the center of a ring of bowing, dancing flames that seemed to move like actual, human dancers, to have feet and heads and robes.

Then the heat coalesced into whiteness in the middle, and Harry saw an enormous dog rear there, like a mirror image of the Padfoot he remembered, with silvery fur and eyes dark as coals.

The dog melted into Sirius's face, and then into an image that Harry supposed must be the younger Sirius, running hard as though to escape from an unseen enemy. Fire melted around him, dripped off like molten metal falling into a trough, and reshaped itself into the Black coat of arms, marked with the words Toujours pur.

Then the white fire gathered into itself, a whirling ball of spears, and shot back towards the stars. Harry tilted his head back to watch it go, blinking away the burning afterimages. He staggered, his weariness catching up with him, as all the old magic surged after it.

Narcissa's hand caught him, and she murmured, as though she wanted Harry and no one else to overhear her, "Named for fire, born in fire, given to fire. Let the fire end him."

The stars blazed brilliantly for a moment. His head tilted so far back that his neck hurt, Harry saw the lightning dart among them for a moment, seeming to touch each of them with extra light. Then the clouds rolled back over them, and a loud crack announced the end of the ritual.

Harry closed his eyes. Tears were burning under his eyelids again, but they seemed to be tears of fierce gladness as much as any sorrow.

"Thank you for allowing me to witness this," he murmured.

Narcissa's hand passed briefly along the back of his neck. "You asked," she murmured. "The fire accepted him. The Blacks' debt is repaid." Her voice changed, becoming more that of the witch Harry remembered. "And if I don't have you back to the hospital wing soon, a number of people will kill me." She tugged him gently in the direction of Hogwarts.

Harry went. His mind was still stirring with the images he had seen, of Sirius as Padfoot and an adult and a child, and the fire, and the old magic...

His thoughts felt, oddly, scrubbed clean, as though the fire had purified them, too. It was the only explanation for why he came up the bargain he would offer Dumbledore on the walk back.

He climbed into bed, barely remembering to take his glasses off and put them on the table next to the bed, and heard Narcissa whisper farewell. Harry muttered something back; it must have been polite enough, because she left.

He went to sleep smiling.

Chapter Forty-Four: A Voice in the Darkness

"Are you certain?" Connor's eyes were wide, and the hand he clenched on the edge of the bed shook slightly. "He managed to arrange everything in our lives so far. I don't think that he would just back down and give in because we go to him with a plan."

"I know," said Harry. He swung his legs out of bed and gingerly tested how well he could stand. Fine, as it turned out, as long as he stretched out a few cramps before he tried to walk. The journey outside with Narcissa last night had been a test of his strength, and his mind still retained the purified feeling, which did him more good than any amount of bodily rest. "But I'm going to offer him some poisoned bait that he won't be able to resist taking."

Connor shuddered. "You frighten me when you talk like a Slytherin." But he stood up and followed Harry towards the door of the hospital wing.

"Sometimes I frighten myself," Harry admitted. He paused at the door and smiled at his brother. "Ready to go see Dumbledore?"

"You were planning to stop by the dungeons on your way, I suppose, Harry?" a voice asked from behind him.

Startled, Harry turned, and then had to brace himself on the wall. He lifted his chin. "Professor Snape, sir. I thought that you were at dinner."

"I knew about the promise that you made Mr. Malfoy, Harry." Snape's face was utterly devoid of amusement. "Not to go anywhere without me or him."

"I was going with Connor—" Harry began.

Snape's eyes pierced him. Harry lowered his head, and felt his cheeks flush. He had already broken the promise last night when he left with Narcissa, and not thought much about it, in truth. He had known he was perfectly safe with Narcissa, and why should Draco or Snape object when his companion was his brother?

He couldn't lie to himself for very long about that, though. Snape wasn't objecting because Harry was with Connor. He would object to Harry going to see the Headmaster without him or Draco at his side, though.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I—I did think you were at dinner."

"If I was, then the Headmaster was likely to be at dinner also," Snape reminded him. "I am certain that he has just now returned to his office, in fact." He cocked his head to the side. Harry saw his eyes flicker over Connor with easy contempt. That bothered him. Snape will have to get used to thinking of my brother as a probable Boy-Who-Lived, soon. I'll need his help to train him. "The Headmaster and I argued when last I saw him. I will not entrust your safety to him."

Harry let out his breath. Well, if he insists on coming along, the least he could do is be a guardian to both of us.

"Very well, sir," he said. "I am grateful that you want to keep both me and Connor safe."

Snape frowned at him.

Harry ignored him. Sooner or later, Snape would learn that Harry came along with his brother, and it was no use trying to separate them. Harry glanced back at Connor, and did his best to coax back the brave smile that Snape's presence seemed to have banished.

"Ready, Connor?" he asked.

Connor nodded slowly. "I think so. As ready as I can be."

"Which isn't very," Snape said, just loudly enough that Harry heard him.

Harry put his head up, but kept an eye on Snape as he marched out of the room. If he loves me, then he won't care when I ask small things of him. And one of those small things will be to stop disparaging Connor's intelligence. Honestly, he's a grown man, a

professor, a former Death Eater who's seen far more of the world than Connor has. Isn't it about time for him to get over his grudges? Albus started when the knock came on the office door. He had been expecting it, of course, ever since Severus had swept into the school holding Harry in his arms, with Connor limping behind him, and a terrible expression on his face. In fact, he had felt the magical auras of the wizards in question as they rode up his moving staircase. But nothing could quite prepare him for this confrontation, it seemed.

He dashed a hand over his beard and sighed. "Come in." It was no use trying to look like the picture of grandfatherly wisdom with these three. Connor was the only one who might believe the pretense, and his brother and Severus would disabuse him of the notion soon enough.

The door opened. Severus came first, his eyes and stride both sharp. He didn't bother with anything but a cold scowl. Albus accepted that, was resigned to it by now. Since their argument over Sirius the night he died, he had known that any claim he might have had on the younger wizard's loyalty was forever and irrevocably gone.

Connor Potter came next. Albus examined him as neutrally as he could. The Boy-Who-Lived was pale, and still did not look entirely well.

Behind him came his brother.

The magic that entered the room with Harry was not to be believed. Rationally, Albus knew he had not grown stronger; though Harry had eaten magic the night of Voldemort's return, he had not made it part of himself as he had last year, but thrown it all back out again before it could become so thoroughly integrated.

But he felt stronger, because this time, he was determined to have his way. If not for his own power, Albus was sure that he would have felt inclined to agree with Harry. The siren song of his magic was incredibly attractive, and if Harry had been out of the hospital wing before this, he would have drawn far more stares and attention than he already had.

Albus knew he faced an incipient Lord, and more than that, a young vates. The Dementors were gone, and incredibly, there had come no reports of attacks from anywhere in Britain.

Somehow, Harry had done the impossible.

Albus would have to make peace and truce with him, for the sake of the future of the wizarding world.

"Headmaster," said Harry, taking the central chair in front of the desk. Severus and Connor sat on either side of him. Albus had conjured three chairs, all of the proper sizes. There was no use pretending that he did not know they were coming, or playing the subtler games he might have tried, forcing them to scramble and look awkward.

Harry, of course, still addressed him by title, but Albus had expected no less. That was the Slytherin way, the serpent's fang folded back until it was needed.

He met Harry's eyes steadily. "Harry."

Harry cocked his head to the side, and a faint smile appeared on his face. Albus blinked before he could stop himself. He had expected a flat list of demands, not this almost coy look.

"You haven't seen Voldemort's Pensieve, have you?" Harry asked.

Albus kept his face blank as he said, "Severus has not seen fit to entrust the information in the Pensieve to me." Severus looked smug at that. It was only a small gesture, but Severus never had learned to stop the lines around his mouth from pulling tight when he was trying to suppress a smirk. Albus had no intention of enlightening him about it, either. First, it hadn't been important, and now, it was one of a few advantages that he had.

If he allowed himself to think about it, Albus knew, he would be frightened at how few advantages he had in this situation. Not even Harry's youth was one of them, as it would have been with any other child.

He rose above the fear, forced it away, shut it out. He had made bad decisions earlier in the year when he merely reacted. This time, too much hung on what he did to surrender to emotions. He waited.

"The Pensieve shows the night Voldemort attacked our home," said Harry bluntly. "He cast two Killing Curses, as you surmised, but the first one hit me. I reflected it back at him while he was still busy casting the Killing Curse at Connor. The second one had time to carve my brother's scar, but nothing more."

Albus's eyes closed involuntarily.

He had told himself he had not hoped, not after he knew that Harry and Connor had learned the whole truth, but he knew now that was a lie. Some distant part of him had hoped that the prophecy was still a trustworthy guide, was still pursuing the path that meant the best outcome for the wizarding world. And now he knew it was not. Harry was the one who had defied Voldemort, the one Voldemort had marked.

Perhaps not, his impatient thoughts whispered. There is still the line about the heart being marked. And Harry's scar is assuredly not a heart.

But even if that was true, it was not the certainty that it had been when Harry was under the influence of the phoenix web and fulfilling multiple lines of the prophecy. It was a faint and slender thread on which to hang the hope of the wizarding world.

Perhaps it is no more than I deserve, however, since I failed to rid the world of Tom myself, and have always looked to a child to do so.

Albus forced his eyes open, and looked at Connor. "And you saw this, as well?" he asked. "You agree to this?"

He saw the flash of longing in the boy's eyes. He wanted to deny this, oh yes, and turn his back on the truth. It would have been easier. It would have meant that he could go on being the Boy-Who-Lived, and not confront what Lily and Albus had done. It would have accorded with the interpretation of events that he had known all his life. For a

moment, Albus even held his breath. A crack between the twins now might prove the final shattering of their relationship. It was not ideal, but if Albus could get Connor away from his brother's influence and insure that he spent time training in the spells that Light wizards used, then he might yet make Connor the prophecy's lodestone.

And then Connor Potter proved why he had been Sorted into Gryffindor.

"Yes," he said, soft, but entirely clear. "I know what I saw. I agree with Harry that he—that he was the one who reflected the Killing Curse." He swallowed. "Peter told us that either of us might be the one the prophecy meant, and I agree. It was too vague." He looked up at Albus, and there was the first spark of betrayal in his gaze. "I never knew it was that vague. Mum always told me that it was settled. I never knew that there were so many words that might mean two different things."

Albus caught Harry's eyes, and saw the pride and pleasure and triumph on his face as he looked at his brother. He also saw the disgust on Severus's face, but he knew better than to think of it as a weapon. For the moment, at least, Severus was slavishly devoted to Harry, and would do whatever the boy asked of him—including putting up with a twin in Gryffindor.

"And you put our lives in danger," said Connor abruptly, leaning forward. "How could you do that? Powerful wizards aren't supposed to put babies in danger. Light wizards don't do that."

Albus blinked. He had not thought Connor would make the leap to this level of accusation so quickly. In retrospect, he supposed, he had been foolish not to see it. Connor had been quick to accept what was taught him in the past by adults he trusted. Now it seemed there might be no adults he trusted left any more, and he would accept what Harry had told him.

"It was necessary," he said. "We had to know who the prophecy would choose. This was our best way of limiting it to only two candidates, not three or more." His gaze came back to Harry, and he remembered again what it had been like to enter that half-shattered

room, and feel the power howling around the twin with the lightning scar. “And there are circumstances that you do not know—“

“We do so,” said Harry, narrowing his eyes. “Peter overheard your conversation, later, with Mum, when you thought it was safe, and he told us about it. I know that I took in some of Voldemort’s powers, or at least his magic-eating ability and then some of his other powers, and that’s the reason I am the way I am. I know I’m a Parselmouth because he was, and able to feed on other wizards because he could. I know everything, Headmaster. I know that you planned to raise me as a guardian to my brother because you feared me. It was the same reason you put the phoenix web on me, in the end. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

Terror such as he had not known in a long time flashed through Albus’s body. He had trusted in Harry’s essential character, chancy as that might have been, even after he had taken Lily’s magic away with the justice ritual. But the boy looking at him now through cold, considering eyes might as well have been Tom Riddle come again.

He reached out with his compulsion, trying instinctively to soothe that anger and turn it away from him.

He met shields piled on shields, raw magic and Occlumency and a series of wards that the boy seemed to have woven into the very surface of his skin. Then a great, sliding serpent opened one eye, and Albus felt the boy’s magic-eating ability coiling about his body. In this mood, he knew, Harry would not simply get rid of the power he swallowed, vomiting it back up when he had an immediate use for it. He would absorb it into himself, the way he had done earlier in the year. Harry could become the most powerful wizard in the world that way, if he wanted to.

“Don’t try that again,” said Harry, his voice gone cold and distant. “I don’t want to drain you, Headmaster, but try to control me or my brother, and I will.”

There were the serpent’s fangs, then, unfolded. Albus knew he could expect no help. This was a vates. This was a wizard come fully into his power, and into his independence, and much too young.

This is the bane we forged, he thought, gaze locked on Harry's face, Lily and I.

And he saw the same realization in Harry's eyes, mingled with no horror, simply acceptance, and knew then why Harry had handed him the truth. Harry was herding him, showing him the possible paths of the future and closing them off one by one. He intended to block Albus against a cliff, and then make him choose between jumping or alliance.

I will choose alliance, Albus thought. If he is the Boy-Who-Lived, I have no choice. If he is a Dark Lord, I must know him well enough to fight him. If he is a Light Lord, I must be his mentor. And if he is vates...

If he is vates, I must be ready to ride the windstorm.

"You have my word, Harry, in the name of Merlin, that it shall not happen again," he said aloud. "Of course, you know that your mother is frantic for you, and wishes to have her sons back again."

"It will not happen again." Harry's voice was calm and assured, without a trace of mockery. "Connor is going to stay with me for the summer. He needs an education in things he should have learned long since."

It is rational, Albus thought, as another gate slammed shut, and who could object to it? We trained him so well. Of course he is the one who can best train his brother, the one who best understands the challenges that his brother is facing.

"Can you be sure it will be safe?" Albus asked, because, shutting off paths or not, he would play this game to the bitter end. Harry was still young, and might not have thought of everything. One deadly weakness that many Slytherins had was the urge to demonstrate their own cleverness, their own subtlety. Caught up in the desire to do so, Harry might have left openings he assumed his enemy was too stupid to find. "There could still be many dangers. The Dementors, for

example, now that they are free from the chains tying them to Azkaban—“

“The Dementors came from nightmares in the beginning,” Harry interrupted. “They told me so. I sent them back into nightmares. I sent them home.”

Albus felt his eyes close again, but this time he restrained himself to a long, slow blink. “They are gone?”

“They are gone,” said Harry firmly. “Forever. The Ministry is going to have to find some new way of guarding Azkaban.” He smiled at Albus, all teeth showing, in a way that said he understood the full consequences for the future, and did not care.

Albus reached for news he had intended to save. Now, while the game was in motion, might be the one chance he would ever have to throw Harry off-balance. “The Ministry will not be happy with you, Harry,” he said. “They are in a mood to crack down on Dark creatures, not see them free. They have passed the anti-werewolf legislation, did you know? As of summer solstice, no werewolf will be able to hold a paying job, have custody of a child, own property, vote, or do many other things.”

Harry’s balance never even wavered. “Then I shall be working to change that, as well,” he said. “But I am sure, Headmaster. The Dementors are as gone as my mother’s magic is, as irretrievable.”

Albus narrowed his eyes. Time to strike at his wording. He ignored his old mentor’s voice in his head, the one that said attacking an enemy’s wording was the last refuge of the desperate. “You say they told you they came from nightmares. Could they have been lying?”

“They spoke to me as vates,” said Harry. “And they certainly vanished quickly enough when I released them.”

“Released them?”

“Tore their web apart.”

He can see the webs. He can see the bindings. Albus could hardly breathe for fear. What web might he decide to tear apart next, just because he can?

Harry lifted his lips slightly, not quite a curl, but an expressive gesture of scorn nonetheless. “You need not worry, Headmaster,” he said. “I know there are other webs in the wizarding world, but I do not intend to simply tear them away from their owners without properly considering the consequences. That includes the webs on house elves, on phoenixes, on unicorns, on dragons, on all other creatures. If I could remember to consider the consequences when I was half-dead of exhaustion, then I can remember to consider the consequences at other times.”

He removed the Dementors’ web when he was half-dead of exhaustion.

And Albus turned the corner, and found the truth waiting for him, the truth he had never been able to run from for very long.

Harry wasn’t just a vates, he was someone who had a very good chance to be a successful vates.

He had a chance to succeed where Albus had failed.

The light Albus had considered an inferno in the distance might well be a sunrise.

He met Harry’s eyes, and this time saw the infernal child smiling, as if he could read the truth out of the Headmaster’s face. For all Albus knew, that was something Severus had taught him.

And of course Harry had not left a weakness in his arguments that depended on his own desire to show off. From the very first, Lily had cultivated a desire in him not to show off, and that meant Harry had little ambition for himself. But when it came to ambition for others, he would fling all his considerable power in the direction of one goal—carefully.

If he had not struggled to prevent this very occurrence for so long, Albus thought that he might even have welcomed the slender hope as a strong one.

At any rate, he had made a mistake, the equivalent of several dozen mistakes, in treating Harry as an enemy. That had to end now, and not only because Albus wanted access to both boys. He had once killed a Dark Lord for the love he bore the wizarding world. He wanted to be part of its future, and, like it or not, Harry was going to be an enormous part of that future.

"I am inclined to trust your judgment on this matter, Harry," he said, making sure to keep his voice grave. "What do you want from me?"

"Little that you won't want to give." Harry's eyes were direct, his voice brisk. "I don't want you to tell anyone about the possible truth of the prophecy, not yet. We don't know yet which one of us it's going to be. But I do want you to tell everyone that the Dementors are assuredly not coming back. I want you to help us make peace with the Ministry over that. I want you to tell Mum that neither of us are coming back unless she manages to gain control of her insanity, and I want you to stop trying to compel us or force us back under her control—legal or mental. I want you to stop threatening Connor, and me, and Professor Snape, and any other of our allies. I want you to take the phoenix web you put on Peter off him. I want you to stop encouraging subtle prejudices against Slytherin House. I want you to research why the Voldemort we faced could have memories of the night his older self attacked Godric's Hollow." He drew in a deep breath. "That will do for a start."

Albus nodded slowly. Here was the list of demands that he had expected, but they were more reasonable than he had thought they would be. "And in return?" he asked quietly.

"I will work with you to understand the bindings on the wizarding world, and what the consequences are of being a vates," said Harry, his gaze open, and calm, and clear. "I will work to use legal means of achieving freedom where I can, and not openly antagonize the Ministry; we need them to win this war. I'll help train Connor. If and when Mum ever regains control of herself, I'll try to be open to a

reconciliation with her. I won't threaten you or your allies, and will fight to defend you. I will keep certain things that you want to stay secret—the phoenix webs, and the truth about what happened to Sirius—silent." He tilted his head. "If it comes down to it, I'll be the Boy-Who-Lived, or the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, and a warrior against Voldemort, and I'll die in the battles against him. If it comes to that. I plan to fight."

Severus shifted. Albus's eyes flicked to him, and he saw the disgruntled expression on the man's face. Harry had not talked to his guardian before coming up with this list, then, and Severus did not like it. Severus always had hated to be left out of anything important.

That might be a weakness I can use later, then, Albus thought, but for now he would commit to going ahead. "I agree," he said aloud. "And, as it happens, I can answer one of your terms immediately."

"Can you?" Harry sounded wary, but interested.

"Yes," said Albus, trying to ignore how much Harry sounded like a classically educated pureblood wizard, and how much that disturbed him. We made him into this, Lily and I. "I believe I know why Voldemort's younger selves could draw on his memories. Tom Riddle, as I knew him, always had much more facility with aggressive probes into others' minds—Legilimency—than with Occlumency. It is one reason that Severus was able to survive as a spy, because he was the better Occlumens." On Harry's right side, Severus nodded grudging agreement. "It is entirely possible that his older self, as he is right now, would not sense his other selves reaching out to him and leaching bits of information from his mind. They would have the mental skills to do so, and the connection necessary to allow it." He leaned forward and met Harry's eyes, because this was another thing he had to know. "Do you have such a connection to him with your scar, Harry?"

A brief flicker of his eyes to the right. It is good to know the boy can still be startled, Albus thought. "Yes," said Harry. "Prophetic dreams, mostly. Nightmares."

Albus had the feeling Harry wasn't telling the whole truth, but decided not to push him. He nodded. "I am not surprised. If and when Voldemort becomes aware of the link between you, he will use it to good effect, but a passive draining from his mind is unlikely to be noticed for some time to come." He let out a breath. "We have a valuable weapon in the war."

"Harry is not a weapon."

Albus jumped. He had never heard Severus sound so angry. The words were barely on the edge of hearing.

"I said I'd fight," Harry reminded his guardian.

"You are not a weapon," said Snape. His eyes had not left Albus. "You are a fighter, a leader. There is a difference. And I know how difficult and dangerous fighting on a mental battlefield is. I will be the one to make the final decision on how you use this link between yourself and Voldemort, if at all."

Albus inclined his head. Not such a weakness. I will have to watch out for him. "I quite agree, Severus," he said mildly. "As you will be watching out for Harry this summer, you may make such decisions then."

Severus subsided back into his chair with a viciously triumphant expression.

"That isn't settled yet," Harry protested, sounding fretful for the first time. "And I'm a fighter, sir. Not a leader."

Albus cursed himself for not seeing it before. There was his weakness.

For now, he would go along with Harry. The terms Harry set were reasonable. He was unlikely to relinquish control of himself or his brother, and both were necessary for the future of the wizarding world. Albus had played a part in making him what he was, and in repentance for that, it was only fair that he listen to Harry. There was

even the hope that Harry might be exactly what the Ministry, Hogwarts, the pureblooded wizards, and everyone else needed.

But if he was not...

Harry had an unusual strength in not caring if he was out in front, in the collective gaze and worship of the wizarding world.

It was also a natural flaw. Press on it hard enough, and Albus thought he could gain control if he ever needed it.

Better not to advertise it, he advised himself, as Harry and he swore vows to each other in the name of Merlin. Much better to subtly encourage Harry back into the shadows—should I need to.

Harry paused and eyed the portrait of the Fat Lady. “I know that Hermione forgave me,” he said, “but how do the rest of your Housemates feel about me right now, Connor? I don’t want to be walking into a nest of Gryffindors convinced that all Slytherins are slimy snakes.”

Connor snorted and shook his head. “Someone said that the other day, and Hermione scolded them until they shut up.” He tugged on Harry’s arm. “Come on. Snape said I could spend some time with you.” Connor frowned at that, and Harry did, too. Snape was still being utterly unreasonable, and saying that he wanted Harry to spend the summer with him, and Draco at most, while Connor went away—where didn’t matter, as long as it wasn’t Hogwarts. “And I don’t feel as comfortable in the dungeons or the hospital wing as I do in Gryffindor Tower.”

Well, that was understandable. Harry nodded, and Connor whispered, “Honeybee!” to the portrait, which swung open.

It quickly became apparent, as they stepped into the middle of the Gryffindor common room, that a lone Slytherin would be of no concern. Instead, most of the Gryffindors were watching in fascination as the Weasley family apparently attacked itself.

"How could you do that, Percy!" Ron's face was as red as his hair. "You know that Dad tried so hard to get that position for you, and—"

"That position isn't worth what he would have paid for it, if he actually had money," Percy interrupted. Harry had never heard his voice so cold and distant. Admittedly, he didn't know the third Weasley brother that well, but Percy had always sounded passionate when he scolded people for breaking the rules. This sounded as though he were trying to imitate Draco. "Mr. Crouch has offered me a very good position. Testing the thickness of cauldron bottoms is very important."

"You're a self-important bastard for accepting it when you turned down Dad's job!" Ron howled, and his face turned redder yet.

It seemed as if he would lunge at Percy, but the twins got there first. A whispered charm from the twin whom Harry thought was Fred Weasley, and a bright purple light limned Percy's body and shrunk his robes. From the slightly cross-eyed expression on Percy's face, they'd shrunk absolutely everywhere.

"I don't have time to argue with you," said Percy, in a lofty tone ruined a bit by his breathlessness. "I didn't expect you to understand, Ron, or you either, Fred and George." He turned and looked across the common room. "I thought Ginny might."

Harry turned to look at the youngest Weasley, who was sitting at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the girls' rooms. She lifted her chin at all the attention focused on her, but, surprisingly, didn't blush.

"Family matters to me, Percy," she said quietly. "I don't see how you can turn your back on Dad."

"That's only because no one understands the brilliance of the position I've been offered!" Percy's fingers were shaking as he fumbled with his Head Boy badge. "D'you see this? I've got the chance to do things that no one else in the family has ever done before, climb to heights that Dad never will, stuck in Misuse of Muggle Artifacts the rest of his life—"

"You sound like a Slytherin, Percy," Ginny said.

Percy's face went pale, then flushed red, and then he slammed his mouth shut. He turned his back and stalked out of the room, shoving the portrait open to an indignant squeal from the Fat Lady. Harry heard the clipped sound of his footfalls up the hall for a moment before they faded.

Harry half-closed his eyes. Percy had sounded like a Slytherin, but he had also sounded as if he were under strain, as if pursuing his ambition were costing him something, which was something a Slytherin wouldn't do.

"I'm going to go after him," he murmured to Connor.

"But—" Connor protested.

Harry gestured to Ron, who looked as if he were about to put his fist through the wall. "I think Ron needs you right now," he said. "I'll come right back after I've talked to Percy, I promise. But something's not right."

Connor nodded reluctantly, and then went to comfort Ron. Harry strode out the portrait hole, taking the time to apologize to the Fat Lady for the rough way he'd opened it, and then looked up and down the hall.

He saw Percy's shadow vanishing around the right-hand corner, and hurried after it. He caught up with him on a turn of the staircase. Percy was walking rapidly, his head down and his cheeks burning, and his hands clenched hard enough at his sides that his nails were drawing blood from his palms.

Pitching his voice to sound loud, Harry said, "I don't know if anyone else will think about it, but I'm not convinced by your performance in there."

Percy jumped, flinched, and slowly turned around. His face was so distraught that Harry nodded. That was a performance, nothing else. Of course, then he had to think why a Weasley would wish to alienate his family.

Harry knew the answer as soon as he recalled the way that Dumbledore had trusted Percy to spy on him last year, and the way that Percy had effortlessly brought him to the Headmaster's office the moment he suspected Harry of wrongdoing.

"Dumbledore asked you to do this, didn't he."

Perhaps because he didn't make it a question, Percy simply gave in. His body sagged against the wall, and he ran his hand through his hair, a disordered gesture that Ron was more accustomed to making, in Harry's experience. "Yes," he whispered, looking away.

Harry shook his head slightly. "Why?"

"The Ministry's cracking down on everyone," Percy whispered. "Dumbledore saw the first signs of it last year, even the summer before last year, and started sending me post. He asked me if I would be willing to pretend to abandon my family for the sake of a post in the Ministry, if they offered it to me. And they did." He laughed humorlessly. "My father has a reputation there, you know, and no one else would ever think of me as anything other than a Weasley if I didn't detach myself from him. No one would ever trust me, ever spill secrets around me. But a Weasley who wants to make a name for himself...well, of course that's understandable. My family's poor. Of course they would think that I might want to be wealthier, and to give up a name that doesn't mean anything but a foolish reputation for courage and honor." Percy closed his eyes tightly. "And being an assistant to Mr. Crouch is a plausible first step for a young man who wants to make a name for himself. He has a reputation, too, and it used to be a good one. And it's a plausible first step for a deep-cover spy for the Order of the Phoenix, which Dumbledore has asked me to be."

Harry felt anger lash to life in him. Another sacrifice. Does Dumbledore never stop?

"You could tell your family what's really going on," he suggested. "I'm sure they'd understand."

Percy shook his head at once. “The twins, Ron, and Ginny are too young to understand why it’s necessary,” he whispered. “And my mum—I know you only met her the once, Harry, but can you honestly see her agree to treat me coldly when it looks like I’ve never done anything to hurt her? Can you see her agree to stop sending me jumpers for Christmas, or inviting me home for the holidays?”

Harry had, reluctantly, to shake his head. It was true that he had met Mrs. Weasley only the once, but she hadn’t struck him as a good actor.

“My father is as transparent as ice,” said Percy. “He can’t keep any emotion off his face. It’s one reason he hasn’t advanced. He wouldn’t be able to stop grinning and winking at me.”

“Bill and Charlie might understand, and I might be able to tell them, but I’ll have to wait and see. If nothing else, being in communication with them too much might damage my reputation. They’re still Weasleys.” Percy sighed and rubbed at his eyes, which were marked with too many sleepless nights. “So, for now, I tell no one. I go deep-cover, and seem utterly and entirely trustworthy, so that Dumbledore can have eyes in the Ministry.”

Harry took a deep breath. He had to know. “Percy, did Dumbledore ever use a phoenix web on you?”

Percy shook his head at once. “No. Only persuasion. That’s why it took me so long. I had to debate for almost two years before I could convince myself to abandon my family for the Order’s cause.” He smiled sadly. “That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But it’s what I’ve decided to do.”

He looked directly at Harry. “Don’t tell them, please.”

Harry nodded. He understood why Percy had stomped out at Ginny’s Slytherin comment. He was being a Gryffindor, choosing a lonely path out of the courage of his convictions, but he couldn’t tell his family that.

Percy turned and started down the stairs again, then paused. "You've seen V-Voldemort," he said, forcing the name out. "He's coming back, isn't he?"

Harry nodded again.

Percy glanced at him over his shoulder. "Well, then," he said. "I'm hardly some great battle wizard. My greatest skill is observing. If I can help the Second War by being a spy, I will."

He went down the stairs.

Harry leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment. He was wondering what he should do with the new knowledge. On the one hand, he had promised not to interfere with or threaten Dumbledore's allies, and this definitely fell under that category. And Harry had no reason to be particularly pleased with the Ministry himself, lately.

On the other hand, this was Dumbledore mucking about in the Ministry, again, and Harry knew someone who would be very, very interested in that information.

And Percy was being a sacrifice, when Dumbledore could have worked out some way to do it that was easier on Percy's mind and heart.

Harry smiled a bit, grimly, as he straightened. He would send a letter to Scrimgeour advising him to watch Percy, and see if he might be persuaded to try different tactics, rather than outright exposing him as a spy or feeding him false information. Dumbledore would no doubt be thrilled to have a spy in the Auror Office itself. Percy would believe he was getting somewhere. Scrimgeour would know where the mucking about was coming from and be able to act at his discretion.

Everyone wins, Harry thought, and made his way back to the Gryffindor Tower, and his twin.

"I'm so sorry, Remus."

Remus shot Harry a faint smile as he packed up his belongings. “There was nothing you could have done, Harry,” he said, sounding as if he wanted Harry to understand that he did not blame him. “The Ministry shoved the legislation through overnight, using a secret meeting of their supporters, the kind that hasn’t been called in a hundred years. Everyone forgot that law was on the books.” He sighed. “And now I won’t be able to teach here again.”

Or hold any other paying job, Harry thought, and fumed silently at the unfairness of it all. If nothing else, he was sure that Dumbledore would try to use Remus for spy and scut work, just because he would want to feel that he was useful to the Order.

“Remus, about Sirius—“ he began.

“I did my mourning already, Harry,” Remus interrupted, his voice calm but firm. “Please. I went out under the full moon and ran myself exhausted.” His eyes caught Harry’s, asking in silence for Harry to drop it. Harry nodded, and Remus continued, “I’m more worried about you, and Connor. How are you doing with Sirius’s death?”

Harry sighed. He had promised to be more open about his emotions, but that was with Draco and Snape. On the other hand, Remus did care about him, and he wanted to speak, for once.

“It’s hard,” he said quietly. “I expect to turn a corner and see him coming towards me any day. And then I find myself thinking of him as an enemy, and wanting to destroy him.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Remus said. “He would have understood. And he did some good with his death.” Harry had made sure that Remus understood the full story of the Shrieking Shack, both Sirius’s death and what had happened at Godric’s Hollow. “He made it possible for you to know the truth.” Remus’s eyes glittered. “I think he would enjoy what is going to happen now, with you and Connor more in accord, and Dumbledore prevented from giving you any more of the same help that was so ineffective with Sirius.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Remus.” And some of the pain was easing. “How much did you know about his life?”

Remus shook his head. “A great deal about his childhood. And Regulus, of course. But nothing about the last few years, that he was suffering from nightmares, or that the curse had never broken.” Remus sighed and closed his eyes briefly. Harry could see the marks of the strain from the full moon two nights ago clearly etched on his face. “I can see why he didn’t want to tell me. It took him forever to tell me the truth about the night he ran away from home and went to James’s house.”

“Why?” Harry whispered. “What happened?”

“His parents tried to compel him to join the Death Eaters,” Remus said. “He broke free of chains and mental compulsion, both, and hurt his mother—badly enough that she was bedridden for the rest of her life—and ran.”

Harry winced. And in the end, he was a Death Eater, sort of, all the same.

He pushed the thought forcibly away. Sirius was at rest now, and that was all that mattered.

“I want you to stay with us for the summer,” he told Remus, to take his mind off things.

Remus snorted as he placed an illustrated chart of the moon’s phases carefully into his trunk. “And has anyone decided where you’ll be staying for the summer, yet?”

Harry flushed. No, they had not. He was insistent that Connor stay with him. Snape was equally insistent that he would welcome no Potter brat into his quarters, unless it happened to be the Potter brat he was guardian of, and Draco had made it icily clear that his parents’ invitation extended only to Harry. It was the last day of school tomorrow, the day that everyone would normally leave on the Hogwarts Express, and still nothing had been decided.

Remus chuckled. "I didn't think so. If you do decide on somewhere, Harry, let me know. For now, I've got some places to go in London, and they'll serve for a few weeks."

"What kinds of places?" Harry asked, interested.

Remus's eyes slid away from his. "Not my secret to tell, Harry," he said. "Werewolf places."

Harry nodded, understanding and letting it go. He wasn't a werewolf, and couldn't really understand what it was like, to have that compulsion-driven beast roaring inside him. If Remus had some contacts among werewolves that he felt he couldn't share, Harry would respect his privacy. "I'll let you know," he said, and leaped up to go through the door.

I remember that.

Harry blinked. The voice in the back of his head had not spoken in several days, and he thought it had left him. But no, it was still there, and now it was speaking in a rush, its words spilling over each other.

There was so much shouting. There was so much pain. Then the magic flared, and I knew that someone had been crippled. I didn't know who.

That's it. That's what it was. I know my name now! My name is Regulus Black.

Harry gasped and had to lean against the wall. He heard Remus's anxious question of, "Harry? Harry, are you all right?" but couldn't answer, staring stunned as Regulus's voice whispered rapidly to itself.

I stole the Dark Lord's locket, but I didn't make it far. I only had time to hide it in 12 Grimmauld Place, not to destroy it. He captured me and made me suffer with the curse, and let Sirius feel it. Oh, the pain. Harry could feel a mental shudder, and hoped that Regulus was not about to go mad or douse him with the pain again, but Regulus recovered after a moment and soldiered on.

I suffered for years. I don't know where I am, but I suffered. The Dark Lord didn't kill me, but shut me up somewhere and left me alive to suffer. That's what Sirius felt. That's why it was so intense.

But then the other fragment of the Dark Lord took over Sirius's mind from the locket and threw me out, because I was a link to his older self and he didn't need me any more. My web was broken, and I was drifting. I was attracted to your mind, and Snape's, and Peter's, and your brother's, and other people's, because they had a connection to the Dark Lord, but the pain had been so intense I couldn't remember anything for a long time.

But now I do. Now I remember.

Harry gulped, and managed to refocus. At least one minor mystery had been solved, then. All the wards on 12 Grimmauld Place had slammed shut and locked tight because Regulus, the family's chosen heir, was still alive, and he hadn't given permission for his cousin to access the house.

Do you know where you are? he asked.

There was long silence, and then an embarrassed, Um. No. It's just dark, wherever it is.

Are you hurting right now? Harry demanded. We have to get you out of there. Why haven't you starved to death?

The spells the Dark Lord cast. Regulus sounded almost dismissive. They keep me alive, but I can't move, and I don't know where I am, and I'm not hurting right now. I haven't hurt since the Dark Lord threw me out of my brother's mind. His voice abruptly dipped. My brother is dead.

"We'll find you," Harry whispered. "We'll do what we can to find you."

"Harry? Who are you talking to?"

Harry looked Remus in the eye, finally, and smiled a little. "Regulus."

After that came a hell of a lot of explanation, and fetching of Snape, who yelled, and Draco, who yelled some more, and Connor, who found the whole thing odd. But Harry had made a promise, and he meant to keep it. He was going to find Regulus, and he was going to free him.

I promise, he thought, and Regulus responded with a wistful, eager note in his voice.

It would be nice to see the sun again.

Harry woke slowly. Someone was shaking his shoulder, and it was the middle of the night. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and heard Fawkes chirp in disgust as the bed shifted, plunging his head further beneath his wing.

“Harry.” Draco’s face was pale, with a note of strain in his voice that Harry didn’t understand until the next words. “Your father’s here. He says that he’d like to see you.”

Chapter Forty-Five: A Conversation With James

Harry stopped outside the hospital wing and tried to slow his beating heart. Apparently, James had come into the hospital wing first, under the impression that his sons were still there, and woken Madam Pomfrey, who had woken the Headmaster, who had woken the Slytherin and Gryffindor Prefects, who had woken Draco and Percy Weasley. Draco had explained this to Harry as he struggled into his Slytherin robes and tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes. Harry had reached the hospital wing first, and was trying to figure out what he would say to his father, as well as when Connor would get here.

“Harry?”

Too late, Harry thought, and turned around to clasp Connor’s hand. “Dad is here,” he said, to answer the question he saw on his twin’s face. “But I want you to remember that we don’t have to go anywhere with him, not when he hasn’t made an attempt to contact us for months.”

Connor gnawed his lip. “The Ministry—“

“Can only use legal solutions,” said Harry.

Connor blinked at him. “I always thought legal solutions were pretty powerful,” he said quietly.

Harry leaned against his brother and let his magic rise from its bonds, swirling around him. “That’s what the Headmaster thought, too,” he said. “I know someone in the Ministry who managed to resist him. And you were there when I negotiated with Dumbledore, Connor. I meant what I said. I won’t let him hurt us. I won’t let anyone hurt us.” He met Connor’s eyes and waited.

Connor swallowed. “And that includes Dad.”

Harry nodded.

Connor took a deep breath. “All right. If you think that he can’t force us apart or do anything, then I’ll go in with you and talk to him.” He

glanced at Harry with a faint smile. “It’s awfully nice to know that I have someone like you at my back, instead of across the room from me.”

Harry inclined his head, and didn’t say what he’d been thinking. You’ve always had me at your back, brother, standing at your right shoulder. Even when you thought you didn’t, or didn’t know you did, I was here.

He reached out and opened the door of the hospital wing. James ran a hand down his face and told himself that he wasn’t afraid of his own sons, damn it, and that he was too awake enough to handle this confrontation.

The reality was that he’d finished the last confrontation with himself, learned the last truth he thought he needed to know to be a good father, and rushed to Hogwarts before sleep could dull the insights to mere baubles of glass from the clear diamonds they were now.

A spark popped in the grate, and he whirled. Madam Pomfrey, who was on her way back to bed, paused and eyed him sternly.

“I won’t have you frightening those boys,” she said.

James nodded, then realized how the motion would look—as if his head were some puppet on strings—and forced himself to repeat it more smoothly. His parents hadn’t believed in most of the pureblood dances used by Dark wizards, but they had taught him a good deal about the importance of proper posture. He gave the nurse his Head Boy smile, the one that had got him out of more trouble in seventh year than anyone would ever know. “I promise, Madam Pomfrey. I just want a little time to speak to them, and convince them to give me a second chance if I can. If I can’t, I’ll go, I promise.” He knew how fragile this chance was, how easily he could mess it up.

Madam Pomfrey snorted a bit, but her face softened. “I do like to see families reunited,” she said. “I saw enough of them torn apart in the War. But be careful with them, Mr. Potter. I mean it.”

James closed his eyes tightly and nodded. He would be. The confrontations with himself he'd fired in Lux Aeterna had shown him exactly how many chances he'd let slip through his fingers in the past, how much care he'd needed and failed to exercise.

He heard the matron move past him and to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the door. Dumbledore had assured him that his sons had been told of his presence, and that his best course was to stay in the hospital wing until they could be summoned, one from the dungeons, one from Gryffindor Tower.

Remember that, James chided himself. One of them comes from the dungeons. Harry is Slytherin, and you're only going to hurt him and yourself if you forget that, or try to pretend that he can be Re-Sorted, or any of the other nonsense you've been up to.

The door to the hospital wing swung open.

James felt his eyes widen and a tide of nervous sweat break out on his brow, but he waited patiently.

His sons came through.

Harry was slightly in the lead, his head up and his eyes fixed on his father. He moved like an Auror, James thought, recalling that part of his training. One important aspect was to look straight into the suspect's eyes, and never reveal that one was nervous or upset or worried. Harry was better at it than he had ever been.

Behind Harry came Connor, his hazel eyes shuttered in a way that James had never seen them, his steps shuffling. Of course, part of that could come from the lateness of the hour, James thought.

"Father," said Harry, his voice the very epitome of polite address to a stranger. "Thank you for coming. We were anxious to know what you would do." He paused and tilted his head to the side. James wondered if he was looking for wards, or spells, or perhaps simply the location of his father's wand.

James nodded jerkily. “I—I was thinking,” he said.

“About what?” Harry’s face was blank.

James took a long, deep breath. This was not going to be simple to explain, but his sons deserved no less, given how long he had spent away. “Sit down, please, boys,” he said, and led them to two hospital beds. Connor scrambled readily into his. Harry watched James.

“Are you going to pace?” he asked.

James blinked at him. “I—yes, probably.”

As if that were the answer he were waiting for, Harry nodded and scrambled into the bed James had indicated. James stifled any suspicion that wanted to rise. He understood almost nothing about Harry at all. At least he knew that, now.

James began pacing, completing two circuits in front of the beds before he nerved himself to speak. “Have you ever heard of Lux Aeterna?”

Connor blinked and shook his head. Harry said softly, “I know it was a Potter estate. But I thought it was sold when you and Mother went into hiding with us—that you wanted to have the money ready, and not risk having a property where Voldemort could attack us.”

James shook his head. “That was only a ruse. In reality, the person who bought it was an—alternative of me. Lux Aeterna can’t be sold. It’s linked to the Potter bloodline. It’s not the place our line was born or gained its name, but it’s the place where we became linked to the Light, and made our major choices, and stored most of our artifacts.” He took a long breath. “It’s a linchpin, boys.”

Connor continued to look blank. On the other hand, Harry looked as if he didn’t know whether to be impressed or frightened.

“I never knew that we had one,” he whispered.

James nodded. It looked as though this wasn't going to be as bad as he had feared. Connor didn't know anything and could be eased into understanding, and Harry wasn't screaming his head off at the first mention of linchpins, which James wouldn't have been surprised about, considering the bindings Lily and Dumbledore had put on him. "We do. It's not a fact we advertise, given how easily our enemies could damage us if they knew about it, but there you are."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Connor looked back and forth from his brother to his father, and finally burst out, "What is a linchpin?"

"An estate linked to a bloodline," Harry whispered. "More to the point, linked to a—a major site of that bloodline. It could be a place where they won a battle, or a place where they chose to be Light or Dark and committed their family to that allegiance, or a place where all their children were born. It can't be sold. It can't be given away. It anchors the family, insures they have a source of magical strength to draw on if all is lost, but it demands things from them, too. If the linchpin is ever attacked when the family isn't there, then it draws strength from the family to support itself. It might drain all of us in maintaining its wards." Harry looked up and met James's eyes. He had settled for looking terribly, gravely impressed. "I can see why you and Mother didn't want to hide there. Voldemort might have had enough strength to drain us even if we were behind the wards, or to shatter the linchpin itself."

James nodded, then hesitated. He had to continue the story, but there was something he needed to know first, and he was no Slytherin, to determine the emotions reliably from the boy's voice. Nor was he an Auror, or at least he was one long out of practice. "Harry," he said, "how do you feel about Lily right now?"

"I don't ever want to see her again," said Harry equitably. "She damaged me too much for me to be neutral towards her, and she encouraged Connor to get me back under control again." For a moment, temper flamed in his green eyes. James refrained from mentioning how much he looked like his mother when he did that. "Maybe, sometime in the future, I could be in the same house with her without wanting to destroy the house."

James nodded. It was about the answer he had expected, and it effectively nixed the plan he might have tried if Harry had felt able to see Lily again. Very well. I'll do the other.

"I went to Lux Aeterna because I knew it was the best place for thinking," said James. "And no one could come after me there. I'm the Potter heir, and if I want other people to stay out, they stay out." He let out a long breath.

"I thought, and I thought, and I thought. The only person I wrote to was Remus. I couldn't trust myself to be civil to Lily or Dumbledore, not after seeing what they'd done to you, Harry." He met his elder son's eyes for a moment, then looked away. "I didn't know what to do about Sirius, and I still feel so embarrassed about Peter that I don't know whether he would welcome a letter from me or not. And you boys were what I needed to make up my mind about. What had I done wrong, and how could I prevent it from ever happening again?

"In the end, I knew it wasn't working. I'd thought, and still I found myself getting stuck in corners. I'd hurt you by being there, but I was hurting you further by staying away. I'd made mistakes in the past, but I had no guarantee that I wouldn't make mistakes in the future."

"We don't expect you to be perfect, Dad." It was Connor who said that, offering him a fragile smile. "We wanted you to be there most of all."

James inclined his head, feeling as though someone had just breathed all the air in his lungs. "I don't deserve that level of confidence, son," he murmured. "Or, at least, I didn't. And I knew I didn't. I could so easily see what I'd been, a rabbit—"

Harry started at that word, for some reason. James eyed him and waited, but when Harry said nothing, James decided it was nothing his boy wanted to share right now and went on.

"But I could see that I'd fall right back into being that if Lily asked me sweetly enough. She convinced me to stay away from one of my sons when he was hurt from being possessed by Voldemort." James shook his head. "And Albus is worse. Albus has the compulsion gift."

"I thought maybe Mum did, too," said Connor then, and drew his knees up to his chin. "Where else did I get it?"

"One of my ancestors had it," said James gently, figuring he could give Connor at least this much. It was one thing he wanted to give his boys, after all: a taste of their heritage. "It comes from the Potter line, not your mother's."

Connor nodded.

"No," said James quietly, "all she had was her words, and the fact that I loved her." He blinked. Quite suddenly, the night he'd returned home to find his sons both bleeding from scars on their foreheads seemed vivid before him. He shook his head. He had been tempted to say it was the night that started this whole mess, but that wasn't true. He'd been what he was long before that night. "I still do," he added.

"So do I," said Harry.

James grunted, feeling as though a centaur had kicked him in the chest. Hearing that from Harry only reminded him of how very, very hard this all was. He wanted to sit down.

But he'd decided that he had to keep on his feet through the whole thing. He best expressed his nervous energy when he was pacing. And he'd be ready to leave, quickly, if Harry or Connor rejected the gift he was going to offer them.

He resumed his story. "I decided there was only one thing I could do, even though it meant staying away from you boys even longer. At least I knew, once it was done, that there was no turning back."

"How?" Harry asked. "Did you make an Unbreakable Vow?"

James shook his head.

"A ritual of some kind?" Connor added.

James shook his head again. “I went into one of the artifacts in Lux Aeterna,” he said. “I knew that when I came out of it I’d be either a fit father, because I would have seen and confronted every one of my faults and resolved to overcome it, or I’d be dead.”

Connor paled and stared at him. Harry frowned.

“And you thought we’d like having a dead father?” he asked.

James flinched. He had to admit, he hadn’t thought of it quite that way. There were still ways in which he needed to work to understand Harry. Harry went straight for weaknesses in his armor that a Gryffindor would have ignored or considered excused by his courage.

“Not really, no,” James admitted. “But I could literally think of nothing else, Harry. If I’d had someone with me, then perhaps I wouldn’t have done it. But I’d spent a few months in isolation by then, outside of the one letter to Remus, and I think I went a bit crazy. I was sure that my dying would cause you pain, but so would my staying alive unchanged, and I couldn’t think of a way to change. And at least, if I died, then Lily and Dumbledore couldn’t use me as leverage against you. So I entered the Maze.”

Harry sat up abruptly. “You must have sent one more letter, at least,” he said. “Snape mentioned a maze.”

James inclined his head, and stifled the irritation that squirmed inside him at the thought of Snape anywhere near his son. That was another thing he would have to get past, for Harry’s sake, since he doubted his son would give up his guardian. “I did. The Maze is a long labyrinth, which showed me something of what’s going on in the outside world—but only what would enhance my facing my mistakes, never anything that would detract from it. I knew when you shed your phoenix web, Harry, and what you boys faced in regards to Voldemort. That was near the end, so I was able to send a letter saying that I’d see you soon. I sent it to Remus. I think he must have shared it with Snape.”

Harry nodded, but not as though he knew, rather as though he were too absorbed in the tale to doubt what James was telling him.

"The Maze was—not too bad," said James. That wasn't strictly true. It had been beautiful, and horrible, but the end result was "not too bad." What he had told his sons was the bare bones of the truth. The Maze had plopped him straight down in front of his mistakes, and refused to let him look away, either from the mistakes themselves or the consequences of them. He'd had to watch what happened when he loved his wife more than either of his sons, when he loved Connor more than Harry. He could tell them that, and would, but they would never understand unless they entered the Maze for themselves, and James hoped to Merlin they never would. "It did what I was hoping for. It showed me how I had to change."

"How?" Harry asked.

James paced twice across the room before he answered again. He felt as though his heart were about to burst out of him, still alive, and hang in the air, for his sons to reach out and crush with a touch. This was the moment that all his plans for the last months hung on.

"It showed me that I needed to consider you boys and your welfare before my love for Lily, or my own peace of mind," he said. "Being a parent is supposed to be difficult and painful, and I'd been avoiding that. It showed me that I was being a coward, hiding from my own capacity for Dark behavior." Harry caught his eye then, and James nodded to him. To Harry and Harry alone, he'd revealed the tale of how he'd snapped and tortured Bellatrix Lestrange, probably making her insane before she ever went to Azkaban. "It showed me that I can't win Light by hiding while others do all the work, or glancing aside from things I don't want to see. I've lost my wife, at least for now, and my trust in my mentor, and two of my best friends from school, because I didn't want to see." He felt tears in his eyes, and wiped at them angrily. I promised myself I wouldn't cry while I did this, Merlin take me. "I'm not going to lose any more."

"And how specifically do we figure into it?" Harry was leaning forward.

James faced him. "You know a lot about the pureblood dances and the traditions that the Dark wizards use, Harry," he said. "But you don't know anything about the rituals and traditions that the Light

wizards use, and I think you should. That's your heritage, too. The Potters have been declared Light wizards for two generations, and acted in accordance with the Light and followed Light Lords for a lot longer than that. You don't know anything about that. You should." He turned and held Connor's eyes. "And you, too. You're both Potters. I've forgotten that for too long."

Harry nodded, he could see from the corner of his eye. Connor caught his brother's eye and nodded, too.

James gnawed his lip. First Snitch caught. "And I know that you both need some place to heal," he said. "Sirius..." He didn't know how much he could say about Sirius without babbling like a fool, so he restricted himself to saying, "Sirius. And Voldemort, Merlin damn him, from both last year and this one. I want you to have some time to recover.

"Some time to play," he added, thinking about the house in Godric's Hollow, shut behind isolation wards. Harry and Connor had had only each other to play with, aside from Sirius and Remus and sometimes James, who almost never played with Harry. Harry was always reading, and James couldn't understand that (he'd almost thought the boy would end up in Ravenclaw, sometimes). Now, of course, he knew why Harry had been reading all the time, and he found himself sick at the thought of it. "Some time to stop living in fear, as though Voldemort were everywhere you looked, and to be normal children."

Connor nodded, his eyes shining. Harry looked as if he might object.

"I want to take you both to Lux Aeterna for the summer," said James. "You can learn about the Potters there, and your heritage. You can fly all you want, and you can have friends come over and visit safely, the way we couldn't at Godric's Hollow." Because of Lily's paranoia, he wanted to say, but it had been his paranoia, too. If he didn't have to face anything Dark, then he didn't have to consider that he might be Dark himself. "You can be together, and safe from the Death Eaters. Lux Aeterna's wards will see to that. And I'm going to ask Remus to come with us."

He met their eyes and steeled himself. This was the part he had to ask, that he'd promised himself he'd say, but he wanted to run from the room anyway.

"And you'll be with me," he said softly. "I can be a real father to you, for the first time in my life."

Connor's face was lit and blazing now. James allowed himself to bask in that for just a moment. In truth, he hadn't expected much argument from Connor, though the Maze had shown him so bluntly how much he misunderstood his sons that he'd wondered.

He turned and looked at Harry.

Harry's eyes were dark green, like Lily's when she worried, and he was frowning. His lightning bolt scar stood out on his brow as he moved his forehead so that his hair tossed aside. The Maze had told James what that scar had meant, too, and Dumbledore had confirmed it in the brief moment he'd spoken with him via firecall. James thought Albus had meant the mention of it to scare him. It'd only made him more determined, instead.

"Could Draco visit?" Harry asked, carefully.

James gave him the truth. "If the wards will accept him. Someone who's drenched in too much Dark magic may not be able to pass them."

Harry looked at him, neutral. "I'm drenched in Dark magic."

"But you're a Potter," said James. "Your blood will permit you through, unless you turn fully and irrevocably to the Dark and are cast out of the family. No Malfoy has that guarantee."

Harry nodded. "And Professor Snape?"

"I don't know," James admitted. "A linchpin can be temperamental, Harry, if its scion is. And I don't like Snape, so Lux Aeterna might forbid him entrance because of that."

"I know," said Harry. "I'm not asking you to guarantee that you'll change your heart. I'm asking you if you'd agree to let him visit, and Draco too, if he can."

James wanted to close his eyes. Harry was an adult in everything but age and height. What have we done to him?

But he knew that in intimate detail, after walking the Maze, so he didn't have to spend long on the question. The important thing was getting to know his son now, and he would hardly be able to do that if he simply refused entrance to Lux Aeterna to Harry's best friend and guardian.

Snape would never have been his guardian if I hadn't ignored Lily's insanity for so long, James reminded himself, and opened his eyes. "I'll do what I can to convince the house to let him in," he said.

Harry was quiet for a moment, thinking. James looked back at him. He was aware of Connor's wide, pleading eyes, and wondered how much of a factor his brother's gaze was in making Harry finally nod.

"I'll come," he said softly, and then winced, as though someone had yelled at him. "But there's a certain unpleasantness to be got through first."

James wanted to close his eyes and dance. He had a second chance, which he had to admit, in some respects, that he hardly deserved.

"I'll come along with you," he said. "They can blame me, if they want." He turned and looked at Connor. "Is there anyone who will object to your going to Lux Aeterna for the summer, Connor?"

His younger son shook his head. "So long as Ron can visit, and maybe others if they want to, then I don't think so," he said.

James blinked, nonplused. He hadn't realized that Connor was so bereft of friends. Of course, if his son's character was anything like James's mistakes had formed it to be, then he would have had little to recommend him lately.

"Of course," he said. "The Weasleys are sworn to Light, too. There's no problem with that."

Connor cocked his head. "Since Lux Aeterna is a pureblood place, will it welcome Muggleborns?"

James smiled. "Yes. It's mostly Dark magic that it rejects."

Connor nodded. "Then I think I'll ask Hermione if she wants to visit," she said. "I—don't know if she will. I've apologized to her, but things aren't exactly the same between us as they were."

He sounded uncertain, but also as if his voice were growing strength with every word. James was relieved. Connor had some resilience, then, and was not going to crack the moment he faced his first true challenge. Perhaps James could, after all, have a relationship with him that wasn't based on innocence and ignorance.

"Dad?"

James turned around. Harry stood near the door of the hospital wing, patiently awaiting his company.

"Thank you," Harry said, and smiled.

It's all been worth it, James thought, to see him smile like that. Draco was not able to understand, really, how all his neat plans for the summer had gone so horribly wrong.

First Harry had put him off when he wanted to come to the hospital wing, insisting that he needed to meet with his father and brother alone. Draco had tried to argue, but Harry had pointed out that the promises he made covered solitude as long as he explained it. Draco had grudgingly agreed to let him go, certain that Harry would be back soon. What could his blood traitor, cowardly father possibly have to say that was at all interesting, or a reasonable explanation for where he had been?

And now Harry had come back, with his father in tow—awkwardly ducking to get his head around the door—and told Draco that he was going “home” with his father and brother for the summer.

It was unfair. Draco had been sure that the universe was on his side for once, as soon as he got past Snape’s stubbornness and managed to make him see that Malfoy Manor was the best place for Harry. Instead, it seemed that the universe was going to take Harry away again, the way it had taken him away for every holiday except Christmas their first year and the first month of last summer. And, Draco supposed, Christmas of their second year, but Harry had been unconscious in the hospital wing then, so it didn’t count.

“You can’t do this,” Draco tried.

Harry gave him a patient glance. “Of course I can. You and Snape will know just where I am, and you can come visit.”

“Maybe,” Draco grumbled. He’d heard stories about linchpins, and a Light wizard’s linchpin was unlikely to let someone who bore the Malfoy name within a mile of it, no matter if he’d done any Dark magic or not, because Light wizards were bigots. “But, Harry, why?”

Harry gave him a curious glance as he shuffled through his trunk, apparently looking to make sure that all his possessions were packed up. “Can you ask? I have to train my brother, and this way, I’ll be able to do that. I want a chance to reconcile with my father, and this way, I’ll be able to do that.” He shot James a smile that James returned, and which made Draco seethe. It hadn’t been too long since he’d been the only one able to make Harry smile that way. Why do all the obnoxious parts of healing have to come along with the good parts? Draco thought. “And we need someplace safe for the summer, so the Death Eaters can’t get us. Hogwarts would be safe, but the Death Eaters do know where we are. Lux Aeterna is safer, more sheltered, and will protect anyone of Potter blood more fiercely than Hogwarts would.”

Draco put a hand on Harry’s arm and forced him to face him. “All of those are fine advantages for other people or for the war, Harry,” he said. “But what about you? What do you want?”

Harry went still, staring at him with wide eyes. Draco waited, his heart pounding unexpectedly hard in his throat. Harry really might change his mind and come with him, he thought in those few moments.

And then Harry smiled at him, and Draco compared that smile to the one Harry gave his father, and found that this one outshone it.

"Thank you," said Harry. "Thank you for asking that, Draco." His voice turned gentle. "I do want all the things I described to you. And, more than that, I know that you and Snape won't forget me, or turn against me, or anything else—that I matter to you more than that, and I don't need to remain with you every moment to repair or strengthen my relationships with you."

Bloody prat, Draco thought dully, feeling a pain slam to life in his chest. He can't tell the truth to try and get out of this. It's not fair. "Then how about remaining with us just because you like being with us?" he asked.

"I would, if that was the only factor," Harry said. "But you know what I am, Draco—all of what I am, probably better than anyone else except Snape. I want to help my brother, too. And he's traumatized from the loss of Sirius, and he has to learn." He looked at James, and made sure the man could hear him. "I don't trust anyone else to train him rigorously enough, yet."

James flinched, but inclined his head. Draco found himself revising his initial impression of the man a bit. He was a pureblood, after all, even if he had sworn himself to Light and stank of that.

"I want to go to Lux Aeterna," said Harry. "I need to do this right now. I can't just say that I want to repair my relationships with my family, and then do nothing to prove it." He let out a little breath. "But sooner or later, they'll be as healed as I can get them, and who knows, in the future?" He smiled at Draco.

Draco nodded slowly. He supposed, seen in that context, that it wasn't so bad. He could visit Harry, and this was only one summer. There were going to be others, and Christmases, and Easter holidays,

and then all their lives after school, when they wouldn't be responsible to parents and annoying clingy brothers anymore.

Draco intended to see that he and Harry spent the majority of that time, if not all of it, with him. He could surrender a present battle for the sake of increasing his advantage in the future.

"All right," he said, "but I want to know that you'll invite me over as soon as possible."

Harry smiled. "Of course." He turned back to rooting in his trunk. Draco glanced around, wondering what he was looking for. It really hadn't taken Harry long to pack. He never spread his belongings out, as though he expected any moment to have to pull up stakes and run before enemies.

Then Harry turned around with a folded piece of parchment in his hands, and said, "Happy birthday, Draco."

Draco blinked. It was true that it was his fourteenth birthday tomorrow, the fifth of June, but he hadn't expected Harry to actually remember, given the state he was in. He had almost forgotten himself.

Almost.

He reached out and accepted the parchment from Harry's hands, unfolding it slowly. Their experience with the Dark Lord writing Harry from the Shrieking Shack had made Draco less than enthusiastic about letters when he didn't know what they said.

This one wasn't a letter, though, unless one counted the salutation of Dear Draco at the top. Below that was a list. Draco began to read it, frowning.

When you made me welcome to our House at the Sorting Feast.

When you made me see that being Sorted into Slytherin wasn't so bad, and I might even make friends there.

When you wanted me to stop cheating in Potions so that Connor would stay out of trouble—I know now that you just wanted to see me get some credit, even though I didn't know that at the time.

Below that the list continued, all times that Draco had demonstrated some gesture of friendship to Harry. He reached the end of the enormous list, his mouth dry, and read,

For friendship, even when I was too blind to see it. For gestures of affection that I thought came from jealousy of my brother. For being a Slytherin in all the ways that matter, and still the best friend I could ever have.

Happy birthday, Draco. I notice it now, and I know what it means, which I didn't then. I'm never going to forget again, and if I fail to notice, feel free to hit me.

Harry.

Draco looked up, furious that a piece of parchment could make him snuffle. He held Harry's eyes instead, and saw Harry incline his head, a small smile playing around his mouth.

"It's not as though we'll be out of touch," Harry said softly. "Even if we didn't owl each other and didn't see each other until September first, we never would be."

Draco nodded, slowly, and slid the piece of parchment into his pocket. "Are you really going to leave now?" he whispered.

Harry glanced over to check with his father. "Yes," he said, when James nodded. "Right after we talk to Professor Snape." He grimaced, as though to say that he wasn't looking forward to that.

"You came to talk to me first, then?" Draco asked.

"Of course," said Harry. "Why wouldn't I? My trunk was in the room, and I had to give you your birthday present, before you wrote me in hysterics and accused me of forgetting it."

His smile kept Draco from hitting him. He reached out instead, and hugged Harry goodbye. “I expect to see you in a few days at most,” he whispered. “And good luck with Professor Snape.”

He felt Harry wince. “Thanks. I’m going to need it.”

Snape blinked his eyes open slowly; he’d fallen asleep in his office again, over the last of the exams for the term. Someone was knocking on his door. There was only one person it could possibly be, at this time of night.

The moment he thought that, he was on his feet, wand out, and striding to open the door. If Harry was in trouble...

Harry was not in trouble. Harry was standing in the hallway, looking mildly startled that Snape had opened the door so fast. Behind him floated his trunk, which looked full. And behind that was James Potter, his arms folded and his slouched posture as annoying as it had ever been.

Snape understood the situation at a glance. He had to. He had known James was coming to see his son, and he knew that Harry would not have agreed to simply go to Malfoy Manor without telling him.

He felt something deep and ugly twist in his chest, something not so different from what he had felt when he first realized that Sirius Black was a danger to Harry. No. I will not permit this.

“No,” he snarled.

Harry sighed. “Can I speak with you, Professor Snape? Please?”

“Yes,” said Snape, and then stabbed James with a glance when he tried to move forward. “Not you.”

James subsided, having the audacity to replicate his son’s mildly startled look over Snape’s behavior. Snape tugged Harry into the office and shut the door behind him.

"Dad's doing much better," Harry told his back earnestly. "And he's willing to take both me and Connor. I know that you weren't willing to do that. I think I should go with him."

"Has Draco heard about this ridiculous charade?" Snape drawled, turning around. Harry blinked at him.

"Of course," he said. "He was the one who came to get me when Dad arrived. And he can visit me in the summer, so he said yes." He hesitated for the first time. "Dad said that you might not be able to visit, since Lux Aeterna is a linchpin. But he promised that he'd try to get over his dislike of you and let you through the wards."

And if he doesn't want me to see Harry, Snape thought, it would be the simplest thing in the world to say that the wards forbade me entrance.

He found it hard to breathe. His situation was different from Draco's, even though Harry might not think it was. James had no particular reason to hate Draco Malfoy. He did hate Snape, and Snape hated him.

The mere thought of being denied access to Harry just because his father was back and had determined that Snape should no longer see him...

It made Snape actively consider, for one moment, kidnapping Harry and Flooing to Spinner's End, despite the danger being at Spinner's End would put them in from the Death Eaters.

"I said that I wanted you to remain my guardian."

Snape blinked, and came back to himself. Harry was watching him with solemn green eyes that understood far too much.

"Dad knows," Harry went on. "He said that you could. He's not going to try to take you away from me, sir, or the other way around. And I know that it must be hard for you to hear me calling him Dad," he added, more quietly, "but I think I should. I think I should reconcile with him if at all possible."

James is still the boy's blood father.

There was a time when Snape would have been unable to forgive that. That time was a year in the past.

Not for the first time, he cursed Harry's tendency to be unselfish, to forgive.

He kept his voice patient. "I think you should have a normal summer, Harry. A summer without any responsibility for once, a summer where you can simply—play, and do all the things that children do who don't have Dark Lords after them. You could have that, here. You know that I wouldn't let you overwork yourself, and you wouldn't have to protect your brother if you were without him. And you could heal from your own wounds," he added. "I know better than to think that you have healed entirely from the loss of your godfather, or from what you saw and did that night, even though you let others think you have."

Harry's eyes slid away from him.

"How many nightmares, now?" Snape asked, and continued pressing when Harry backed a step away from him. "How many?"

"One or two each night," said Harry reluctantly. "They're not visions from Voldemort, though, just nightmares," he hastened to add.

"I don't care," said Snape pleasantly. And he didn't, he found. Next to what might happen if Harry went home for the summer with people who didn't understand him, who would demand things of him, who wouldn't notice the signs when Harry was driving himself furiously into exhaustion, he didn't care at all. "You still need to overcome them. And having all the weight of the world on your mind won't let you do that."

Harry stopped backing, and took a deep breath, and looked up at him. "But the weight of the world doesn't go away just because of where I am, sir," he said. "I know you want to protect me, but you can't. Not from everything."

"The wounds I took that night were mild in comparison to what's coming. I know," he added, when Snape tried to interrupt. "I've heard and read the histories of the First War since I was a child, remember. Voldemort's going to try to do all that again, and probably worse. I'll be in the front lines, fighting, because I have to, and I'm going to take on the brunt of some of it."

"This is the part where I'm your ward, and grateful for it, but also not a child." Harry spread his hands. His magic shimmered around him, a palpable force in the room, and Snape had to catch his breath at the strength of it, for all that he normally didn't notice anymore. "I'm a powerful wizard, and maybe the vates, and a warrior." A leader, Snape almost said, but from the look in Harry's eyes, this was not the time to have that argument. "I have to get Connor ready, and to help him heal. There's no one else who can." He looked at Snape searchingly. "And you're unwilling to have Connor here."

"Because I want you to think of yourself for once, and not that child!" Snape snapped.

Harry smiled. "I'm grateful, believe me," he said. "But war doesn't really care what we want. And this is the middle of a war, now, one that hasn't really ended since Voldemort came to Godric's Hollow. I haven't known what peace is."

"Then you should know it now," Snape urged him. Why can't the blasted boy see that?

"Not right now," said Harry. "When the war's done, maybe."

"Or next summer," Snape said, voice light as a threat.

Harry inclined his head to him. "Maybe then." He glanced at the door. "Does this mean that you're going to let me go to Lux Aeterna?"

Snape struggled with himself for a long moment. He knew that Harry would not hurt him if he refused, but Harry was also unlikely to stay, and forbidding the boy to go as his legal guardian would result in resentment from him. And then James might have more reason than

ever to take Harry from him, and if James challenged Snape in open court, he would win.

At the same time...

Harry forgives too easily. James was part of what happened to him, no matter how sorry he is now.

"You will tell me in an instant if your father does anything to hurt you," Snape said. "You will Apparate here if he does it again. I know that you can get through the anti-Apparition wards."

Harry nodded. "I would come to you," he said. "If only because I'd be afraid of what I would do to him if he did that and I stayed in Lux Aeterna." His eyes held a fire that Snape liked, but thought should be deeper and hotter.

"You will write to me every day," said Snape. "Without fail. And you will tell me the truth about your nightmares."

Harry bowed his head meekly.

"And you will not drive yourself to exhaustion teaching your bloody brother," Snape finished.

Harry nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said, and stepped forward to hug him, briefly. "I know how hard this is for you. I promise, you'll see me again, one way or another, before next term."

Snape embraced him back, his eyes alighting on the pile of books across the room, the ones he'd acquired from the Department of Magical Family and Child Services.

There is that, of course. There is always that. It will take some time to prepare, but revenge is, in any case, a dish best served freezing.

Snape was able, with that reminder, to agree to let Harry go, to even open his door and give only a half-sneer at James, to watch Harry walk away with a wave of his hand and his trunk floating behind him.

Then he shut his door and went back to marking the last exams, so that he could begin his research.

If Harry will not take the proper steps against his father, against Lily, against Dumbledore, I will take them for him.

“Ready, boys?”

Harry glanced once around the hospital wing, then nodded. Connor had his trunk beside him, and Godric in his cage on top of that. Harry had his trunk, Hedwig in her cage, and Fawkes perched on his shoulder. Fawkes had caught up with them as they were leaving the dungeons, and didn’t seem inclined to be left in the school. Remus was standing just behind Connor, holding his own belongings, seeming a bit stunned at the change in his fortunes. Harry hadn’t heard what James said to him, but apparently it was enough to get him to come along.

Then he turned and looked up at his father, and took a deep breath. The rest of what we need isn’t anything you can see.

“Ready,” he said.

James gave him a faint smile and cast the Floo powder into the fire. “Lux Aeterna!” he called, as the flames blazed green, and stepped into them and was gone.

Connor followed him, tugging along a startled Godric, who beat his wings against the bars of the cage, and then it was Remus’s turn. Harry watched him go, and then jumped as Fawkes crooned encouragingly.

“I know, I know,” he muttered, as he picked up the Floo powder and cast in another pinch. “I wasn’t scared. I just wanted to be sure that everyone else got through all right, that’s all.”

Fawkes chirped again, shoved his head against Harry’s cheek, and then took off in a ball of flames, flying fearlessly through the fire.

Harry drew a deep breath, and called out, “Lux Aeterna!”

Eternal light.

Harry hoped, as he jumped through the fire and into his future, that the name was a good enough omen to make up for what had preceded it.

No big deal. It's just the rest of my life.